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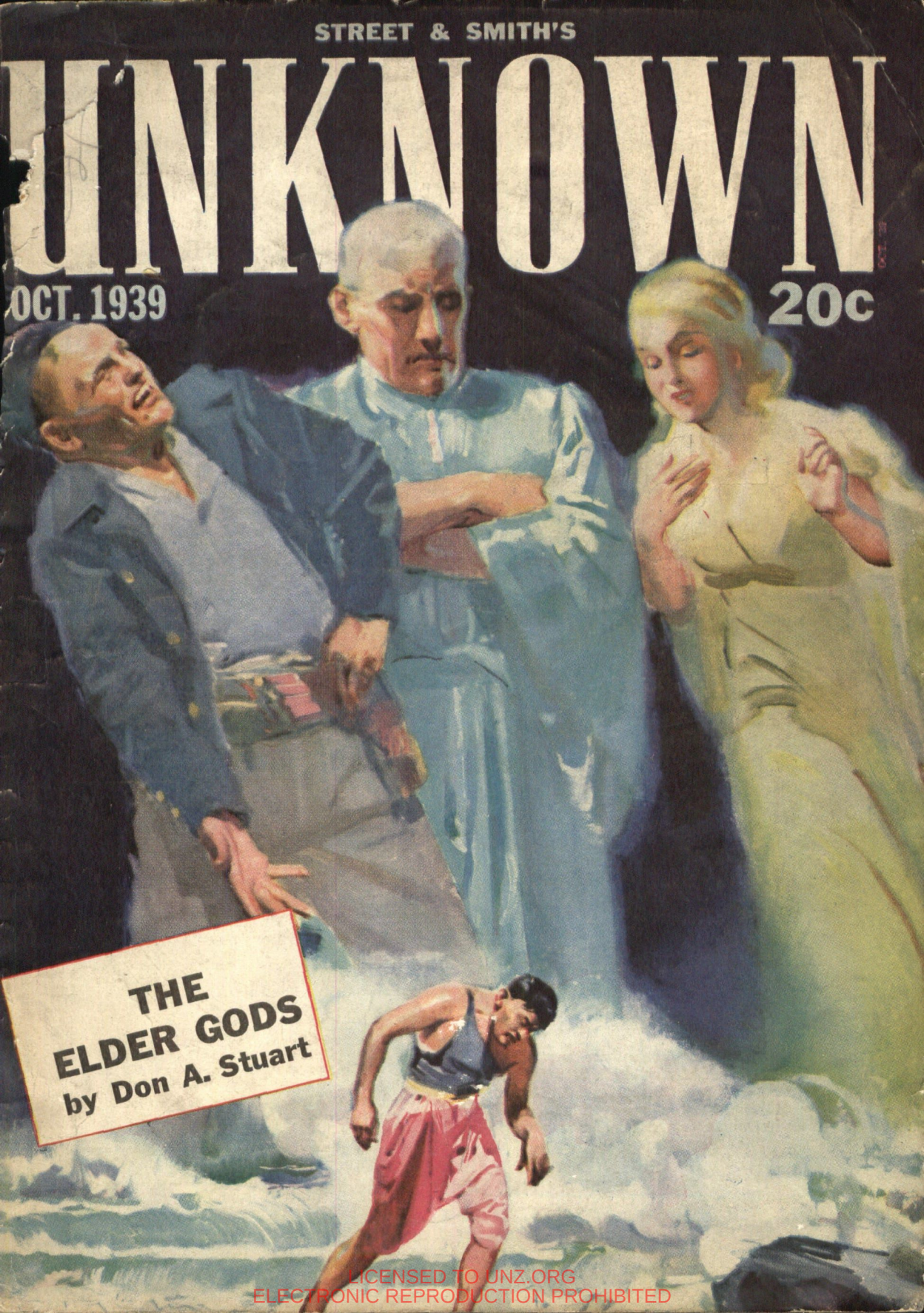

THE ELDER GODS
by Don A. Stuart

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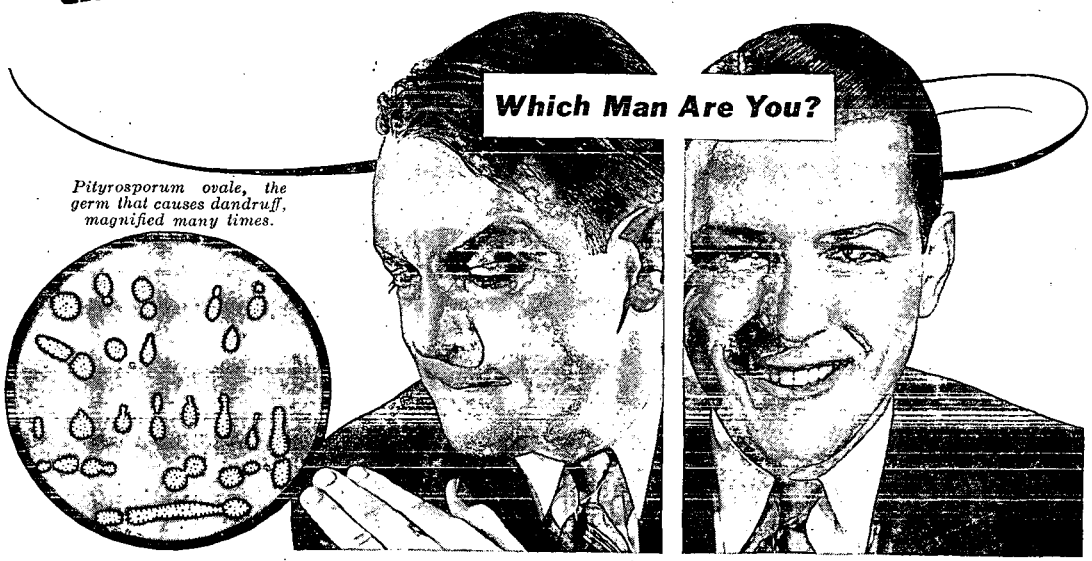
New, Easy, Scientific Home Method that GETS RID of DANDRUFF



Pityrosporum ovale, the germ that causes dandruff, magnified many times.

Listerine Antiseptic kills stubborn bottle-shaped germ (Pityrosporum ovale) which scientists proved causes dandruff. That's the secret of Listerine's amazing results . . . why many people have turned to it for real relief.

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St. Louis, Missouri

THE TREATMENT

MEN: Douse Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp *at least once a day.* **WOMEN:** Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic right along the part with a medicine dropper, to avoid wetting the hair excessively.

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LISTERINE THE *PROVED* TREATMENT FOR **DANDRUFF**

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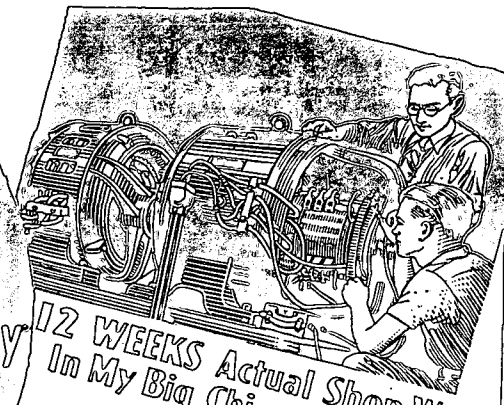
And If You Are Short of Money Pay Tuition AFTER GRADUATION



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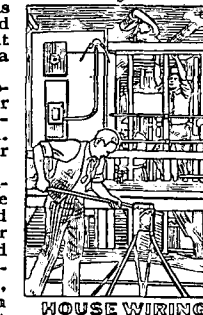

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H. C. LEWIS, President

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Illustrations by: Gilmore, Isip, Kirchner and Wesso.

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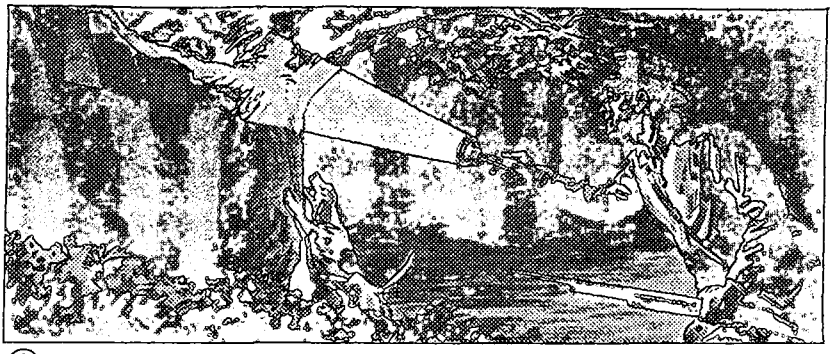
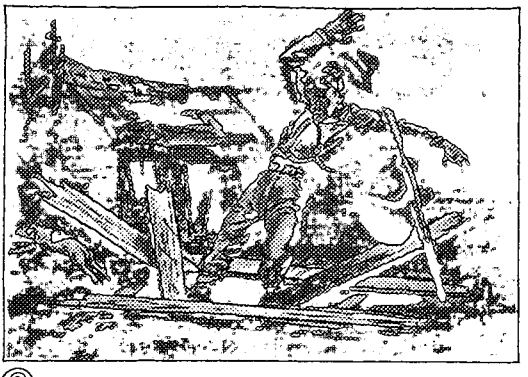
DEATH LEERS as Hunter Plummets into Pit!

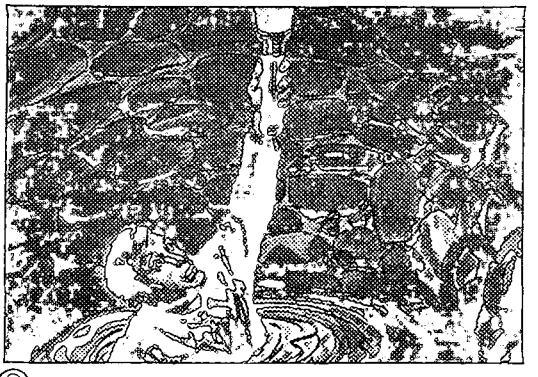
JAMES KIDWELL
Mt. Vernon, Texas



① **"With my hound Jep,** I had bagged seven 'possums and was heading back for bed," writes James Kidwell. "I was cutting through the yard of an abandoned hilltop house, when the hound gave a frightened yelp and lit out for home.



② **"I chuckled,** for superstitious folks down our way regard this as an ill omen. The next moment, rotten timbers crashed under me—I was falling!



③ **"I landed** at the bottom of an old well. It was impossible to scale the walls. I retrieved my flashlight from the icy water. She still worked.

④ **"My only chance** was to keep shooting the beam upward, hoping that it would be seen and that the batteries would last. My luck was good—two boys going home from town saw the strange flashes, and investigated. Those 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries positively saved my life, as I would have died of exposure, if help hadn't come. You've got to be in the predicament I was before you really can appreciate the value of *fresh* batteries.

(*Signed*)

James Kidwell"

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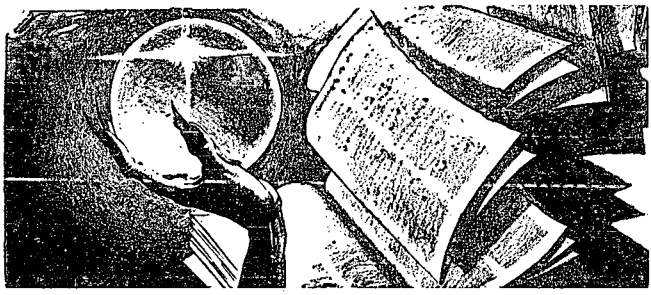

OF THINGS BEYOND

In a world oppressed with so much of nerve tension, neurosis, and stark madness, it would seem that some such study of the mind as is suggested in "The Elder Gods" might be more helpful to mankind, in general, even than so evidently important and valuable a thing as the study of cancer. We know a bit of the world of material things; we know so piteously little of our own minds. We know so little of the vast possibilities that pure mentality has, and infinitely less of the art of controlling the powers we know it has.

By the exercise of will alone, a man can paralyze an arm or leg—or bring on death. But not by conscious application of that will. A man brought to the operating table for a very minor, entirely safe little operation, protesting complete absence of fear—an anæsthetist suspicious that the man actually was fearful. The anæsthetist, to ease the patient's mind, dropped plain water on the chloroform mask at first, to relax tension. At the third drop of water—*the man died!*

Only superstitious natives can be killed by fear, they say.

If pure will can kill a healthy man—what might pure will, *controlled,* do for a dying man? Pure will can—men know now by actual experience—blank out all pain, or pain from one region of the body, immobilize an arm or leg. "Hysteric paralysis," doctors call it. Suppose they used that a bit for immobilizing a wounded arm to give it time to heal? Suppose they learned a bit about man's mind and learned to stop the useless agony of neuritis?

We've learned a lot of the world and how it works in the past century; I wonder if, in learning that, we haven't forgotten, and even consciously buried a lot of immensely valuable knowledge of man's mind that ancients knew. They had no laboratories, no reagents and tools. But laboratories, reagents, tools and meters don't help much in the study of so immaterial—yet potent—a thing as will. Before men had facilities to study material things, the seeker after knowledge had but one channel for his curiosity, the channel forgotten almost today—the study of the mind.

We know far more than the ancients did, of course. So any scientist can prove. They had no laboratories.

The ancients might have something more to say; they had no laboratories—so they studied man!

The priests of Egypt had powers, certainly—and some very sound, if tricky, engineering, too—as did priests in many other lands. As for modern medicines—drugs—the Egyptians had a very nice collection. Most of modern medicine's remedies come from plants and animals; one of the two chemicals known that will actually cure—not merely relieve—a disease is quinine, which the South American Indians revealed to Europeans. And for other drugs—

Norvell W. Page's new novel of Prester John, "Sons of the Bear-God," coming next month in Unknown, brings up something of that, the magic of an ancient race who lacked laboratories, but yet had minds to work with—and on!

THE EDITOR.

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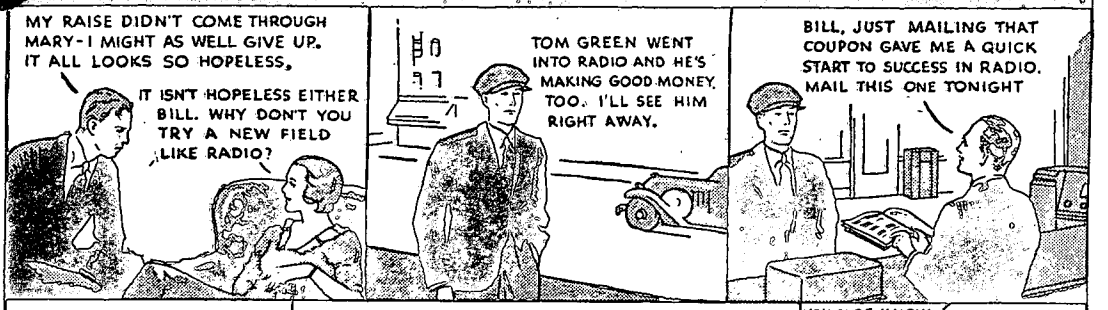
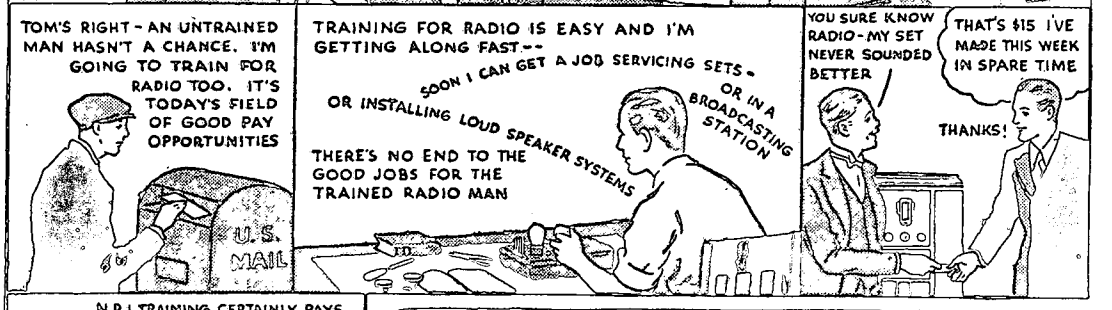
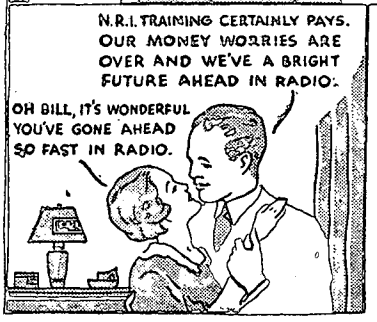
THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!







I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time jobs after graduation.

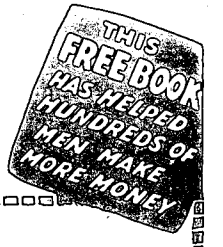
Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9JD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute Established 25 years

He has directed the training of more men for Radio than anyone else.



HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

Broadcast Operator After Twenty Lessons

"When I had completed the first twenty lessons I had obtained my license as Radio Broadcast Operator and immediately joined the staff of WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator." —HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

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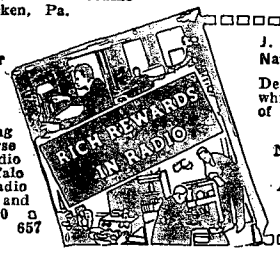

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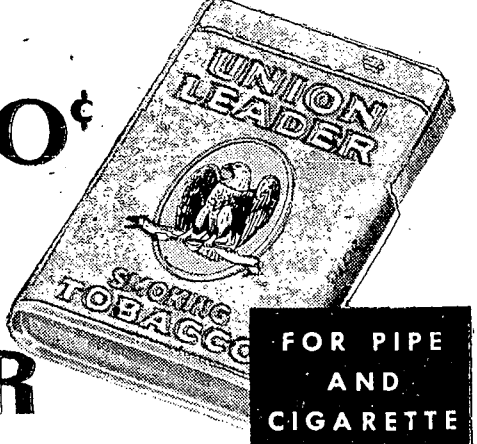
"Son, you've got the makin's of a man!"

IT does me good, Son, to see you takin' to Union Leader. *There's* a tobacco a man can tie to!

In my time, I s'pose I've tried a hundred brands, but I always come back grateful-like to Union Leader. For there's no substitute for what Union Leader puts into that big red tin:—flavor-filled, hill-grown Kentucky burley . . . aged to make it mellow-mild . . . processed to rule out annoyin' tongue-bite.

Me—I like Union Leader burnin' cool in my pet pipe. But I can see how you young fellers enjoy those crisp, fresh cigarettes that Union Leader makes! Yes sir, and on a young man's pay, that 10¢ price is something to be thankful for, too!

10¢



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UNION LEADER

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THE ELDER GODS

By DON A. STUART

LORD NAZUN, chief of the Elder Gods, looked down at the city of Tordu, and sighed softly. Beside him, Talun snorted angrily, a pleasantly dilute odor of drying kelp and salt sea eddying about him in the soft breeze. Lady Tammar chuckled and spoke softly.

"It oppresses you more than usual tonight, Talun?"

"It's sure we'll gain nothing in this way. Nazun, tell me, what was in the minds of men when we appeared first?"

Nazun stirred uneasily, a vague, lean bulk against the midnight blue of the

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sky. "I know, my friend—but there was a certain fear, too, that we would not change with the changing times. Perhaps that is our flaw."

"And the greater flaw," the sea lord growled, "is standing by in idleness and watching the destruction of our people. The Invisible Ones are death—death not of the body, but of the spirit and mind. Where are my sea rovers gone? Dead and decayed. Fishermen—good, stout workmen though they be—lack the spark that makes the sea rover."

"We cannot attack the Invisible Ones by attacking, by taking over, the minds of our people; that is the First Law," Nazun pointed out.

"No—and ye need a solid right arm to attack the Invisible Ones, which none of us possesses. But, on the same, we possess neither a solid thing that keys us subject to material weapons such as a solid right arm may wield!"

"You'll turn no man of Tordu against the Invisible Ones. The pattern and movement of every Azuni is so set and known to the Invisible Ones, as to us, that he would be dead at the hands of the priests of the Invisible Ones before he moved half across Tordu," Lord Martal pointed out. "There are chances in the lives of men—but not when the Invinsible Ones have time to plot out those chances first!"

"No stranger has reached these islands in five centuries," Nazu sighed. "Your sea rovers, Talun, rove as close by the shore as a chick by the old hen's feet. While they rove the shorelines of the continents, they'll never find Azun . . . and without wider knowledge of the pointing needle, no seaman ventures far. It will be a century yet before men wander the oceans freely once more."

Talun's sea-squinted eyes narrowed farther. "They wander," he said explosively, "where the will of the winds drive them, my friend. Now if ye want a stranger here on these islands, we'll see what the winds and my seas can do!"

Nazun stood silent, squinting thoughtfully at the sea beyond, and the town below. "One stranger, Talun—only one. One stranger, without background known to us or the Invisible Ones, is beyond calculation and the prophecy of the gods; half a dozen strangers, and there would be more factors on which to base foreknowledge—and defeat!"

"One, then," growled Talun. "One good sea rover, with a spark and flame within him, these damned Invisible Ones can't read or quench!"

LORD NAZUN looked down at the wilted form on the pebbled beach with a wry, dry smile on his lips, and a twinkle of amusement in his narrowed, gray eyes. "A sorry specimen you've fished up for us, Talun. And did you need to cause so violent a storm as the recent one to capture this bit of drift?"

Talun's dark face knotted in a grimace of anger, then smoothed in resignation. His roaring voice cut through the dying whine of winds and the *broom* of surf on the beach below. "I never know, Nazun, whether you mean your words. The scholars that fathered you forgot me, and forgot to give me wisdom—a sad lack in this day. That washed-up thing may be a bit bedewed, a bit softened by immersion in good brine, but he'll dry out again. And he's a man, a real man! There's more than mush in his back, and more than jelly in his heart. These Azuni men that sail by the bark of a dog and the twitter of a bird will be the vanishment of me!

"By the sea, I'd say such a storm as that last was needed to net that man! There was courage in him to build his ship on the edge of the brine, and sail straight out from land! A man who uses land as a guide only to show him how to get farthest from it quickest has my liking, and my protection."

Talun's heavy brows pulled down bel-

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ligerently as he looked Nazun in the eye defiantly. Slowly his gaze shifted back to the man uneasily. Nazun's deep-set, narrow gray eyes were friendly, twinkling with pleasant good humor, but there was in them a depth beyond depths that left Talun, for all his own powers, ill at ease and unsettled.

Lady Tammar laughed softly. "And while you argue, he dries out. Now, good Nazun, you have netted your fish, or Talun has netted him for you and brought him to this beach. What plans have you for him next?"

"He's been well stripped," Lord Martal grunted. He waved a muscle-knotted, stout-fingered hand at the man who was beginning to stir again on the lumpy mattress of hard quartz. "He has neither gold, nor sword to carve it out with, nor any other thing. I'd say he was fitted to take advice for his next move. He could have used a sword for defense, Talun. You might have left him that. By the cut of his figure, I'd say he would sooner fight than ask for help, weapon or no."

Talun scratched his bearded chin uneasily and snorted. The dying wind permitted the faint aroma of fish to cling about the bulky figure once again in a not unpleasant intensity. More a signature or card of identity than an offense. "Your favorite irons don't float," he said, half annoyed. "The man showed sense when he parted with that when his cockleshell went down. Now leave my works alone, and let me worry of my sea. I've done my task—a man, such as you asked, at your feet, stripped as you asked, but sound. You can find him swords and breastplates enough in the junk shops of Tordu, where your ex-friends have left them, Martal. My fishermen are still with me."

Lord Martal laughed. "Good enough, friend, and right enough. We'll equip him once again. There's a house, a small temple where men worship chance and probabilities, where I may find a way to help our new-found friend. Ah, he's getting up."

WEAKLY, Daron pushed his elbows under him, sneezed vigorously, and gasped. He looked about him at the empty beach. The pebbles that had left a faithful imprint on every aching muscle of his back and shoulders gave way to broken rock a hundred feet away, and that in turn became a rocky cliff. Daron turned his head wearily, heaved himself erect, and dragged himself over to the nearest good-sized boulder. He held his head firmly in place till the dizziness left, then looked about. The wind was dying away, but the surf still made hungry, disappointed noises on the beach as it tried to reach him.

He looked at it resentfully. "You took my ship, and you took my crew, which seems enough. Also you took from me all sense of where I am, which was more than enough to rob me of. May the gods give that there are men somewhere near—though it seems unlikely. No man of sense would inhabit so unpleasant a coast."

He looked up the beach, which curved away somewhere beyond the rain mists into a gray, formless blank. Down the beach, the high rocky cliff dwindled away just before it, too, was swallowed by the gray, wind-driven mists. Overhead, the dull gray was darkening to night, and the dull gray of his spirits darkened with it.

He followed the line of the cliff speculatively, and looked at the smug, uplifted brow of it near him. There was no sense struggling up here if it fell away to an easy slope half a mile down the beach. He heaved himself up from the boulder and started, annoyed that he had not the faintest idea whether he was moving south, east, north or west. To his sea rover's mind it was a feeling of nakedness equal to the undressed feeling the lack of his sword gave him.

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Half a mile, and the cliff did give way to a cragged set of natural steps. Above, he found his dizziness returned by the effort of climbing, and the beginnings of a mist-obscured meadow of some wiry grass that thrived on salt-spray. He set off across it doggedly as the gray of the skies gave way to almost total blackness. The wiry grass clutched at his toes, and he felt too weary to lift his feet above it.

Resignedly, he lay down to wait for daylight. Half an hour later, the chilling, dying wind induced him to change his mind. He stood up again and started on. The wind had swept away the last of the rain mist, and presently he made out a gleam of light that came and went erratically. He stood still, squinted his eyes, and watched.

"It may be like the pools I saw in the Dryland, a dream of something I want, but, again, it may merely be that trees are blowing in front of the light. In any case, it's something other than gray mist to walk toward."

He stopped a hundred yards from the little building and watched carefully. Strangers were not welcome in most of the world he'd known, but a rough gauge of the way an unknown people received a stranger lay in their buildings. Sticks and wattles—the stranger was apt to be the dinner. Good timber and thatch—the stranger was welcomed to dinner, usually roast sheep or lamb. Crude stone—the stranger was allowed to enter, if he could pay for his dinner. Finished stone—the stranger was shown the way to the public house.

It augured ill. The house was built of fieldstone, well mortared. But still—they'd be less likely to make dinner of him, even though they might not make dinner for him.

HE KNOCKED, noting, for all his weariness, that the door was singularly ill-kempt. It opened, and Daron paused in measurement of the man who faced him. Six feet and more, Daron stood, but the man before him was four inches more, built long and supple, with an ease and grace of movement that spoke of well-ordered muscles.

But the face eased the sea rover's mind. It was high and narrow, but broad above the eyes—strange eyes—gray and deep, almost black as they looked out from the warm firelight of the room beyond. The cragged, strongly hewn features were keen with intelligence; the eyes and the tiny wrinkles around them deep with a queerly eternal wisdom.

"Your coast, yonder," said Daron, his mouth twisted in a grim smile, "offers poor bedding for a man whose ship is gone, and the grass of your meadows seems wiry for human gullets. I've naught but my gratitude left to buy me a meal and a night away from the wind, but if that be good value in your land—"

The cragged face of the native wrinkled in good-humored acquiescence as he opened the door more fully. "It is a depreciated currency, much debased with counterfeit, a strange trouble of our land. But come in, we'll try the worth of yours."

Daron stepped in, and passed his host. Rather quickly he sought a chair made of X members supporting broad leather bands. It creaked under his weight as he looked up at his host. "My knees have yet to learn their manners, friend, and they seemed unwilling to wait your invitation."

"Sit, then. How long have you been without food?"

"Some twenty hours—since the storm came up. It's not the lack of food, I think, but the too-free drinking of the last five of those hours. Wine has made my knees as unsteady, but I liked the process better."

"I have little here to offer you—a shepherd's fare. Tordu is some two days' journey away, beyond the Chinur Mountains."

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"Hm-m-m . . . then this is some extensive land I've reached. Friend . . . but stay, if I may eat, the questions and the answers both will boil more freely. If you have the bread and cheese of the shepherds I know, they'll serve most excellently to sop this water I've imbibed."

"Sit here and rest, or warm yourself nearer the fire. The wind is dying, but turning colder, too." The tall man moved away, through a doorway at the far side of the stone-walled room, and Daron's eyes roved over the furnishings.

There were simple things, chairs—stools of leather straps and wooden X's, some simple, wooden slabs—a table of darkened, well-worn oak. Some sense of unease haunted Daron's mind, a feeling of decay about the smoke-grimed stone of the walls not matched by the simple furnishings.

Then his host was back with a stone jug, an oval loaf of bread, and a crumbling mass of well-ripened cheese on an earthenware plate. He set them on the table, as Daron moved over, for the first time observing closely the dress of his host. His clothes were of some blue-green stuff, loosely draped to fall nearly to his leather-sandaled feet, bunched behind his head in a hooded cowl thrown back between the shoulders now.

Daron's quick eyes studied the fingers that set out the food even as he reached toward it. They were long, slim, supple fingers, and the forearm that stretched from the loose sleeve of the blue-green cloak was muscled magnificently with the ropey, slim, deceptive cords of the swift-actioned man's strength.

DARON'S eyes raised to the face of his host. The level, gray eyes looked down into his for a long moment, and Daron shrugged easily and turned back to his food. The eyes had regarded him with honesty of good intent—and the green-robed man was his host. If he chose to call himself a shepherd within his own house, to a stranger he befriended, that, then, was his business.

"I am called Nazun," his host said presently. His voice was deep and resonant, friendly, yet holding within it an air of certainty and power that the sea rover had heard in few men before. One had been his friend, and had carved out an empire. None of them had been shepherds—for long.

"I am Daron, or Kyprost—which I think you may not know. I am afflicted with a strange curse—like quicksilver, I cannot long remain in any place, yet in all my wanderings I've never heard of land that lay halfway from Western world to Eastern. And—unless I swam back in five hours over the course my vessel spent twelve days laying—this is a land I never knew existed."

"This is the island Ator, of the Azun islands. Some few of our people have sailed eastward to the borders of the great continent from which you came, but not in many generations have the Azuni been the sea rovers they once were. They wandered here from the lands you know, long ago, but now they see no joy in roving. Azun is very pleasant; they forget the old ways, and the old gods, and worship new ideas and new gods."

Daron grinned. "Pleasant, is it? It was a hard, gray place I found. But for your light, it seemed I might find no more of it, for that the wind was cooling, I found for myself before I found your door."

Daron looked up again into Nazun's eyes, his blue eyes drawn to the gray. For an instant the firelight fell strong and clear on the cragged, sun-tanned face of the giant before him. The deep-sunk gray eyes looked into his levelly, from a face set for an instant in thought, a face of undeterminable age, as such strongly hewn faces of men may be. There was kindliness about it, but in that instant an overwhelming power. Da-

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ron's careless smile dropped away, so that his own strongly chiseled face was serious and intent.

The gray eyes, he suddenly saw, were old. They were very, very old, and something of the chill of the dying wind outside leaked into Daron from those eyes.

The sea rover dropped his eyes to his food, broke a bit of bread and some cheese, ate it, and washed it down with the full-bodied wine from the stone jug.

The room was quiet, strangely quiet, with only the rustle of the fire to move the drapes of silence. Daron did not look up as he spoke, slowly, thoughtfully. His easy, laughing voice was deeper, more serious. "I am a stranger to this section of the world—friend. I . . . I think I would do better if you would give me some advice as to how I might proceed, and how I might repay you for this meal, which, at this time, is life."

NAZUN'S voice was soft against the silence, and Daron listened without looking up. "Yes, it is a strange corner of the world, Daron. Many generations ago the Azuni came, sea rovers such as you, and settled here. They found rich land, good temperatures, a good life. For some long time they roved the sea, but Azun was home. They built a peaceful country—there were no other sea rovers then to menace them—and prospered here.

"It was a peaceful home—they stayed by it more and more. Why wander harsher lands? The Azuni have not wandered now in many generations. There is no need. And with peace, comes wisdom. They grew too wise to worship the old gods, and found new gods—you'll learn of them, the Invisible Ones, in Tordu, the capital of Azun—in new ways.

"But you will learn of this. Primarily, for safety and for pleasure here, remember this: the Azuni know more of minds and the works of the power of mind than any people of the Earth. This power may make things uncertain for you . . . but only certain of the Azuni have the full knowledge now.

"For certain reasons, friend, I cannot have you here the night. Go from the door straight out. There is a broken wall of stone some two hundred paces out, which you will see by the light of the moon—the clouds are broken to a scudding wrack, now—and beyond it is a cart road. Turn right on this, and follow it along. You'll find a public house along the road within the hour. And—if someone offers you a game, accept and you may have luck. Take this—it's a small coin, but planted well, it may grow a large crop."

Daron rose from the table. Turning as he rose so that his eyes sought the glowing fire. He slipped the small silver coin into his palm, tapped his hand, and the coin spun neatly in the air to slip, edge on, between his fingers and be caught. "Aye, friend. To the right. And—I will learn later, I think, how I may return this favor. Tordu would seem to be the goal of a sound man on this island of yours."

"To the right," Nazun nodded.

Daron stepped to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the night. The moon shone through rents in the shattered cloud veil. He went on steadily to the broken wall, crossed over, and turned right. He flipped the silver coin in his fingers and noticed to himself that the bright fire in the stone house no longer shone through the windows. For that matter, the moonlight shone through the ruined roof to make a patch of light in the room beyond the shattered, unhinged door.

Daron shrugged uneasily, and remembered the friendly creases about the deep-set gray eyes and tossed the coin into a pocket with an expert flip. He swung easily down the rutted cart road.

"Nazun," he said, and cocked an eye

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at the scudding cloud wrack. "Now the local people might know that name—and there are other ways than asking questions to learn an answer."

II.

THE WIRY GRASS gave way to scrub, and the stunted brush to patches of trees. The stone inn house nestled in a group of the trees, half hidden by them, but a signpost hung out over the road to rectify that flaw; the traveler would not miss it. Daron fingered his single coin and squinted at the signboard as the moonlight flickered across it like the glow of a draft-stirred candle.

"That," said Daron softly, "means 'The Dolphin,' which would be a right goodly name for such a place, so near the sea; but that lettering is like to none I've seen before!" He let it go at that, and went on toward the door, with a clearer idea in mind as to the meaning of the name of Nazun. He had, seemingly, acquired a new fund of wisdom, a new language!

The voices of men and the laugh of a girl came through the heavy oaken panels of the door as he raised the knocker, and the heavy, rolling tread of the host as he dropped it down again. The man who faced the sea rover now was no giant, but a short, round-bellied little man with a face all creases sprouting seedling whiskers of a red beard as the only clue to what his vanished hair might once have been.

"Aye, and come in, for though the night is bettering, it's foul enough yet, my friend."

Daron smiled in answer to the infectious good humor of the innkeeper. "And who knows better than I? Pray your drinks are better than brine, for I've had my fill of that, and your beds are better than the quartz the waves laid me out on. I've lost a ship, a crew, a sword, and all but one silver coin." Daron looped it upward so it glinted in the light of a hanging lamp and the glow of the fire.

The innkeeper's smile-creased mouth pursed worriedly. "Your luck seems bad, and . . . and your coin small," he said doubtfully.

"Ah, but you think too quickly, friend," laughed Daron. "Look, out of a crew of a dozen stout lads, I lived. You say my luck is bad? Out of all that I possessed, this bit of silver stayed with me like a true friend, and you think it will leave me now?

"Now let us test this thing. Look; I want a bit of meat, a bit of bread, and perhaps some wine. You want my coin. Fair enough, but you say my luck is bad, which is a curse on any seaman. Let's see, then; we'll try this coin. If it falls against me, it is yours, and I seek another place for food. If it is the friend I say—"

The innkeeper shrugged. "I am no worshiper of Lord Martal, and I've no faith in the luck he rules. Go back through yonder door, and you'll find his truest worshipers in all Ator, I swear. They gamble away two fortunes in an evening, and gamble it back between 'em. But they gamble away my wine, and pay for that, wherefore they're welcome. Perhaps I should thank Lord Martal at that."

Daron chuckled. "By all means, man! He smiles on you, and the old gods are good protectors, I feel." The seaman swung across the little entrance room toward the curtained entrance to the main dining hall beyond. The smoke-stained oaken beams hung low enough to make him stoop his head a bit as he pushed the curtain aside and looked beyond. A dozen men, some in well-worn, stout clothing bearing the faintly sour, wholly pleasant odor of the sea, some with the heavier smells of earth and horses, clustered about a table where five men in finer clothes were seated. Three girls, in tight-bodiced, wide-skirted costumes

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Nazun shook his head. "A man acts on experience of the past; a god can predict his future. But a god acts on knowledge of the past and the future! The fate of gods none may know—nor the fate of those who serve gods!"

watched and moved about to fill the orders of the men.

None saw him at first, as they watched the play of the dice that leaped and danced on the dark wood of the table top. Daron moved over, and some of the outer fringe looked up at him, their boisterous voices quieting for an instant, then resuming at his easy grin and nod. The ring of farming people and the fishermen made way a bit, uncertain by his dress, for, sea-stained and flavored, it showed fine-woven cloth of good linen, worked in an unfamiliar pattern with bits of gold and silver wire.

The seated men looked up at him, and back at the dice, and rolled again. Daron leaned forward, putting his hands spread on the table. "My friends," he said seriously, "I have an unpleasant mission here. My ship is lost, my crew is gone, and all possessions left me save

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this coin." The single silver bit clinked down. "Our good host has said my luck is foul; I feel that it is good. Wherein does this concern you? It is this; if I would sleep softer than the stones outside, and eat fare tenderer than twigs, I must plant this seedling coin and reap a harvest. I fear it is from your pockets, then, the harvest must come."

The nearest of the players laughed, spun Daron's coin, and nodded. "One stake, friend, and we'll finish the work the seas began! A man with such a thing is hard put—it would buy a bit of food, or a bed, but not both, and the decision would be hard. We shall relieve you!"

"Now by Nazun, you won't I feel!" Daron laughed—and watched their eyes.

The player shook his head and laughed. "Now by the Invisible Ones, I know we shall. If you still put your faith in outworn gods, it is small surprise they stripped you thus."

Daron relaxed, and nodded to himself. "Then we shall see."

"And," said the holder of the dice, passing them to Daron, "this is no field for Nazun, for there's no wisdom in these bits of bone. If the old gods appeal to you, why then Martal, I'd say, would be the one you'd swear by here."

"No wisdom in the dice—no, that may be. But wisdom may reside in fingers, thus?" Daron spun out the three polished cubes, and saw them turn a five, a five and a six. "What would you have me throw?"

"I'll take your stake," said the hawk-nosed player to Daron's right. "Better this." His fingers caressed the dice, spun them, and shot them forth. They settled for a total twelve.

"With two dice, I'd match it, with three—" Daron's roll produced fourteen. "But even no," as he picked up two silver coins, "we need some further crops. A bed and board I have, but Tordu is farther than a seaman walks. A horse, I think— Will some one match me more?"

A SWORD filled the scabbard at his thigh, and a good dirk was thrust in his belt, a horse was his, and money for a day or two when he sought his bed that night. He whistled a bit of a tune as he laid aside his things, dropped the thick oak bar across the door, and settled for sleep. "I'll say this for this land," he muttered, "very practical gods they have. Unique in my experience. They do a man very material good turns. Wisdom, it is, eh? I thought as much—"

The sun was bright, the air warm, but not uncomfortable, and the horse better even than the lamp's weak light had suggested in the night, when Daron started off. The cart road had broadened to a highway, and this to one well-traveled within a pair of hours. The scrub bush and sheep-dotted meadows gave way to farmlands bordered with fences growing neatly from the ground, well-barbed fences of some cactus bush that the sheep showed sound respect for.

There was little timber here, but under the clear sun, the meadowlands and farms stretched off into pleasantly blue-hazed distance, where the banking of the haze seemed to indicate a mountain range stretching off from east to west. The road led south, but like most farmland roads, seemed unconcerned with haste and directness. It visited from door to door, and rolled aside when some small swale of land suggested climbing hills. The horse was sound and strong, and seemed to have a fundamental nature as blithe as Daron's own, and little minded to bother a fair day about a change in masters.

Toward noon, the rising swales of ground began to show some signs of timber, and the stone-walled farm cottages began to trail attendants in wooden walls, and sheep appeared again more frequently. The haze rolled up by

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the rising sun still banked to the south, but the shining gleam above it indicated that the haze had retreated to solid mountain fastnesses, with a snow-crowned peak above.

The sun was warmer now, and where a small stream trickled through a wood-patch, Daron dismounted, tethered his mount to a bush near the stream, and spread his food. He ate, and leaned back in easy contemplation and thought. The wandering breeze brought some faint hint to him of a visitor, and his swift thoughts placed his line of action before the odor was more than identifiable to him. He looked up with a smile as the footsteps of the newcomer crunched on the twigs nearby.

He saw a wind-blown, sun-tanned man, rather stocky and heavy-muscled, with eyes squinted permanently from the glare of the sun on waters, a sailor's cap perched solidly on his round, dark-haired head. A black stubble of beard showed on his heavy jowls and on his thick, muscular arms, and an impudent tuft thrust out from each ear.

"My friend," said Daron, "you're a way from the sea, which, by your gait, would be more homelike to you."

The stocky one seated himself with a grunt. "Aye, and the same to you. Those linens were never stained in a brook, and, unless you ride yon horse lying on your back, it's not the sweat of your beast.

"Bound for Tordu?"

"One I met last night named such a city. I am not familiar with this country—a remarkable land I find it—and it seemed the part of wisdom to seek the center of the place. And, by the bye, men call me Daron."

"Talun," grunted the stocky one, seemingly annoyed. "Tordu's a foul place for an honest seaman, though seamen of that ilk seem fewer with every season. The whole race of Azuni have grown soft and stupid, and the stupidest have gathered in Tordu to admire their overweening stupidity. They have no sense or judgment, and they shun the sea like the plague. Time was when the Bay of Tor was a harbor." Talun snorted disgustedly. "They've got it cluttered so with fancy barges now no merchant ship can enter, and they've set a temple to those precious Invisible Ones of theirs across the mouth of the bay—they call it Temple Isle now; it used to be the finest shipyard in Azun—and their slinking Invisible Ones hang over the bay mouth till the good clean sea stays out in disgust."

"INVISIBLE ONES? Hm-m-m. I'm somewhat unacquainted here, though I've heard a dozen times of these Invisible Ones—not including several references to them, both prayerful and annoyed last night, from certain gentlemen of the countryside I gamed with—but little explanation of them. Gods, are they?"

"Gods?" Talun snorted angrily. "They pray to them as to gods, and say they are not gods. The people of Tordu are fools and crazed ones at that. 'No gods,' say they. They scorn the old gods of their fathers, for, say they, the old gods are foolishness—made in the image of men, and hence no more than projected men and the power of men's minds. The true god-being, these wise, wise thinkers say, is certainly no man, a thing of force in form mere mortal mind cannot conceive. So they build themselves these Invisible Ones, and give them power, and curse the old gods.

"They're fools, and have no wisdom, and admire each other's mighty thoughts."

"The wise thinkers, eh?" mused Daron. "We have such thinkers in my land, and we have certain other thinkers who have one certain trait that sets them off—a remarkable thing. They think long study much, and confess to those who ask that they learn steadily that they know little. Some think that a crabwise

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way to knowledge—but I am prejudiced; I learned from such a man."

Talun stirred uneasily, and his squinted eyes turned upward to the clear blue bowl of the sky. The blistering sun was burning down from it to his face, but as he stared upward a fleecy cloud formed, roiled, expanded and hid the sun. Talun settled back comfortably.

"Learning never appealed much to me. One of my friends—but not to me. The wisdom of the fools appeals not so strongly to the countrymen, nor to the sailors, and on that alone these Invisible Ones would gain no strength, for these thinkers are few, if noisy with their thoughts.

"But another thing has influenced them," continued Talun. "The gods, these deep thinkers say, should know the future—else what's the use of consulting gods? Now the old gods did not know—or did not explain, at least."

Daron sat more upright, looked harder at this stocky, hairy figure, the very image of a sailor or fisherman, from whom the shifting breezes brought a gentle tang of salt and fish and drying kelp. "Your gods, in this land, are most unique, to me," said Daron softly. "Perhaps men have a certain reservation in their thoughts of gods in other lands—a thought that a god is some vague thing, whose statue man may carve, and to whom offerings may be made, but a remote being who does strangely little manifest for his worshipers. Now the gods of this country, I find, are most substantial beings—and most helpful. The Lord of Chance, of Contests, let us say; he wished me well last night, I think." Daron nodded toward the browsing horse. "Now if a people blessed by gods who have such usefulness complain, it would seem they set hard standards indeed."

Talun grumbled and rolled over. Daron cast an eye upward; alone in the blue vault of the sky the single white fleece of cloud remained motionless between them and the sun, casting a pleasant, tempering shade. "Men want more than they have—and that, my friends tell me, is good, and the reason seems sound enough," answered Talun. "If a man be satisfied with what he has, why, surely, he will get no more. If a man catch a dozen fish, which is enough to feed his wife and a child, and fish no more, I'd think little of his courage, or his sense.

"But now this knowing the future. It is not always good. These wise thinkers of Tordu, they put it that the gods should know, and the gods should tell men—and their Invisible Ones do. But the priests of the Lord of Wisdom, the wisest of the old gods, says gods should know—but should not explain all things."

"Why not?" asked Daron.

"If a god should tell you that this night you would wager your horse against a slave girl, and lose both girl and horse on a toss of the dice, what would you do?"

"Why, sure I'd be a fool indeed to wager then!"

"WHEREBY, if you do not, you make a liar of the god," said Talun with a snort. "The god's prophecy of the future was not accurate, for you did not. Now such a prophecy the old gods made. 'If,' might the priests report, 'you cast your nets at Seven-Fathom Bank, you'll snare a swordfish and spend three days mending nets.' Now the fishermen would not, but would lose a good day's fishing, and grumble that the prophecies were vague.

"But these Invisible Ones; they have no vagueness. They tell a man 'As you walk home this night a horse shall kick and break your skull. Farewell, worshiper!' And, that night the man is dead. He swears no horse shall come near him—they did at first—but the prophecy is right, of course. If the Invisible Ones read future right, then

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that must be his fate. If he has wit to escape that end, why then he's made a liar of the gods." Talun dropped one heavy lid, and his dark-blue eye speared Daron sharply. "And, young friend, old gods or new, no mortal man makes a liar of the gods!"

"That calls for thought," sighed Daron. "I see no joy in knowing my end if I have no hope of changing it."

Talun grunted and stretched himself up. "Nor did the country folk or fishermen at first. But try a human with that thought for long, and not even the gods will make him stand firm. Live a year beside a temple of these Invisible Ones, knowing every day that there you can find sure and absolute the day and manner of your death— No. Men are mortal, and they fear old Barak, the dread god of their mortality, but the sharp, itching bite of curiosity will drive them on. You've seen the countryman twist the ox's tail to drive it in the pen the ox can smell is death? So curiosity sends men into that temple they know means loss of hope."

Talun shrugged. "Once there—what man has courage and will to walk away? They sink like wine sots, drunk with future knowledge, giving up all strength and drive of spirit, for the Invisible Ones tell them what is coming —and they know it will come, try how they may, so you may be sure they do not try.

"Go your way, friend. I have business at times in Tordu, too, so I may see you again." Talun wandered off through the woodpatch and vanished behind a tree. Suspiciously Daron looked after him. The phrase seemed to fit this Talun's exit with a discomfiting literalness.

Daron lay back to stare again at the cloud. It hung still precisely between the sun and the spot where Talun had sat. But it was evaporating rapidly now, and presently the blue vault of sky was clear. Daron chuckled as he untethered his horse and swung onto his back. Convenient, that trick.

His horse trotted on easily across the plain, passing a farm wagon here, neighing to a browsing horse along the way, and Daron sat straight and thought. A notion was forming at the back of his mind that Talun had not altogether been a friend to him. That storm, now, that took his ship and crew—

But—gods were gods. There was no sense to cavil at their decisions; they did as they might choose—and there's an end to it.

Well, it was evident he had a mission here, and surely no higher adventure had he sought than this! With gods like those this land boasted—they did not seem a stingy lot!

The day passed, and he stopped that night in another inn, the Sheath and Scythe, it was, and the men who drank the lank, cadaverous host's wine had no smell of sea or fish about them. The heavy, earthy smell that permeated the inn was thick to Daron's sea-trained nostrils.

Experimentally, he tossed the dice again this night. He lost three throws, won two, and knew his answer. What he needed, seemingly—but these gods did not take the spice of gambling from him by constant winning. He settled down then, and what Martal's help did not bring him, a certain deftness of fingering did well to make up for. The night grew fatter then, when he found that, somehow, this land had never learned the mighty magic of the three snail shells and the pebble.

Content, and more than warmed by good wine—his shells had betrayed him with clumsiness, else he'd have stayed longer—he went to sleep.

III.

WITH a sailor's instinct, for all his hoofed carrier, Daron found his way to the docks of Tordu straightaway—and

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snorted as he saw them. No smell of good fish and bad, no circling, wide-winged argosies of gulls. The broad, V-shaped Bay of Tor spread out, its mouth plugged by the Temple Isle, its waves showering familiar gold and diamond back to the blue skies and the sun. But the clean, salt-and-fish smell of any coastal sea was gone, buried, drowned away in a scent that reeked in the sea rover's nostrils. Incense! The bay was dotted with hoggish, bloat-belly barges, with white canvas mocked in pretty silks, good yellow cordage tinseled to golden threads.

The final insult to the sea was the crews. Girls! Golden-tanned pink skins, and dainty figures playing seamen! Slave girls with beribboned chains of gold pulling at the oars that drifted the silly barges out.

Daron groaned. The sailor's eye roved round the harbor, and his sea rover's soul writhed in anguish. High, granite-glinting cliffs, impregnable to any storm, formed a solid wall broken in two deep, sharp clefts, the twin mouths of the bay. Set like a grim, squat fort across it was the island, a grim, stanch island of black, pinnacled basalt bedecked with carved and spidery-lined temples, beflowered with beds of plants in artificial soil.

Here was a harbor the gods had made impregnable! They'd set across its mouth such harsh defenses as no sea could smash, nor any force of men invade, for but a few score of good catapults could make those deep-cloven channels—wide enough for peaceful shipping—invulnerable to all assault.

Yet the great walls of granite fell away in rapid slopes so that the city of Tordu, at the head of the bay, straddling the Tor River, was on a level beach-front.

And barges—pretty barges mocking galleys with their silly, slim slave girls—monopolized this port!

Daron clunked his heels disgustedly against the stout ribs of his horse, and turned his back on the place. The horse *plop-plopped* away in an easy trot, while Daron's ire mounted within him. The horse, not Daron, avoided the rumbling carriages of gaily decked men and women, skirted the shore-side area of marble-fronted shops selling things for temple decorations and offerings.

Even the sound of this section of the city was unlike any Daron had known before. It rang with the voices of men and women, as any good town must, and the creak and *plop* of harness and horses' hoofs. But the ringing jingle of good steel swords, the strong, hard ring of vital, active voices was gone. The calls were vague, unimportant, even to themselves; the faces of the men were interested, but more from seeking interest than because they found interest in each small thing of life.

Daron drove westward across the city, away from the bay. The level of the ground swelled upward gently, and the street was bordered by high, plastered walls, tinted white and pale blues and greens and pinks, as pale as the life force of this silly city.

Then the ground dropped down again; and as it fell, the view of the bay was lost behind, and the large estates that hid behind those plastered walls shrank quickly. The broad street split, and narrowed—and Daron began to look about more keenly. The pale color of the walls gave way, the pale, soft voices changed, the timbre of the city's sounds changed, and the smoky, spicy scent of incense gave way with it. From the east a breeze was sweeping the smell of a true city, the odor of foods and men and the green of growing things.

A GOOD two miles back from the bay he found the sector he sought. The men were taller, heavier; two women leaned from nearby windows listening with hand-cupped ears to the angry voices floating from a neighboring house. The

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sweetly sour smell of wine floated out of a whitewashed inn, and the smell of hay turned the horse's nose to the stable yard as easily as the other turned his master's course.

Daron dropped the reins into the hand of the boy that roused himself from whistling lethargy to split his freckled face in a friendly grin. "You've seen a man become a fool with the aid of wine?" said Daron gruffly.

The boy's eyes rounded. "My . . . my father runs the inn—"

"A horse may do the same with food and water. Feed the beast, but mind he's no more sense than you, so feed him light, and water him gently." Daron grinned, and a coin flashed suddenly in the air and winked into nothingness as the boy's hand moved.

Daron swung from the courtyard to the street, and filled his lungs with a grunt of satisfaction. The air had not the tang of clean sea sweeps, but the insult of the incense was out of his nostrils. He blinked his eyes and entered the inn.

A half dozen townsmen, in loose armless cotton shirts that slipped on over their heads, and woolen breeches falling loose to their knees, contracting sharply to mold the shins, looked at his different garb. The shirts were blue or green or yellow, but the breeches all were brown.

Daron grinned. "You've a good eye for color, lads, but tell me this: is it good brown earth or dye that makes your breeches match?"

One of the townsmen looked casually round the room and chewed on something slowly before replying. "And where would you be from, stranger? It's clear you never heard of the Elder Vows."

"That might be, and that might be an answer. What is this Elder Vow? And is it the custom here, too, that the host so hides himself a guest goes thirsty?"

"No guest goes thirsty, but the host wears no more badge than does the guest." The man rose slowly, unfolding from behind his table like an endless python pouring from his hole. Lank as a ship's mainmast, he towered over Daron, his long arms dangling downward like wet rags hung out to dry.

Daron stepped back and eyed him up and down. "By Talun, now, you'd serve as jury-rig in any tall-sparred ship! If your drinks be as long as you, then there's good value for the money here! Give me something cool and wet that has less of the vinegar than the wine I've had since I landed on this shore."

The innkeeper grinned, leaned slightly, and plucked a cobwebbed bottle from a little door that sprung open at his touch, put it on the table, and gestured broadly. "You've learned the trouble of the wines here quick enough.

"Now as to the color of our breeches; it seems small account of yours, but a long morning makes for easy talk, so sit. The answer's short enough, but there's little joy in short answers."

Daron smacked his lips and sighed contentedly. "Hm-m-m . . . a drink at last that wouldn't eat its way through marble stones! Let's hear this answer then, be it long or short. I'll leave when my business presses."

"I'm a fool," said the innkeeper sadly. "My friends"—he waved his queerly flexible long arm—"are fools. My foolishness—our foolishness—lies in this; we like to think that what we strive for we get, and what we get we get by striving for."

"A sound-seeming thought. Wherein lies the foolishness?"

The lanky one waved his arm again. "The street is full of those who will tell you. The temples on the isle are full of Invisible Ones and priests who will prove it for you.

"We go to the Older Gods. We wear these breeches to save us headaches."

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DARON cocked his head. "A curious custom. In the Dryland, where once I was, there was a race of men who wrapped a white cloth about their heads to keep it cool and save them headaches, but this trick of wrapping the nether end seems somewhat strange. Still, one cannot tell. It seemed insane enough—that wrapping up the head to keep it cool—until I tried it, after twice finding that the sun was no puny light for man's convenience there. So I suppose you have some logic in your acts."

The man on the innkeeper's left blinked his eyes slowly, combed a full, spade-shaped beard of curly hairs, and patted a pate as bald as an empty seascape. "We tried wrapping our ears. The worshipers of the Invisible Ones still argued. So we wore the brown breeches and simply knocked down those who argued with us. A year or so—and they stopped arguing."

"By Nazun, that's wisdom!" Daron laughed. "But still I seek the explanation of the foolishness of striving for your wants."

"I," said the innkeeper, "am Shorhun." He stopped and chewed thoughtfully, looking at his sandaled foot.

"Daron, I'm called."

"If I go to the Temple Isle, the Invisible Ones will tell me whether or not the landlord of this place—who believes that I am a fool because I do not go—is going to throw me forth into the street. Incidentally, I'd be a fool in truth to seek an answer from the Invisible Ones on that; I know he is. But they might also tell me where I next will go, and whether I will prosper. Say that they say I will. The Invisible Ones prophesy always what *will* happen. Wherefore, if they say I will prosper, it will mean little to me that I do. It seems no prize of my good effort. If, through carelessness, I crack my pate on yonder doorframe, even that I prefer to think of as my own, my personally blundering act. If the Invisible Ones prophesy it—why, I have yet to crack my pate, and lack the satisfaction of cursing myself for a blind and imbecilic nitwit in the doing of it.

"Wherefore it is foolishness. I should go and learn my fate and then sit back to live it, like a twice-told tale, mumbling in my teeth as my preknown date of death draws near.

"No, I prefer old Nazun. He deals in warning of things he well knows will not happen, I suppose—things I am warned against and, by avoiding, avoid trouble. Things—so the Invisible Ones say—I was not fated to meet in any case." Shorhun shrugged, a mighty thing that started like a tidal wave running up a narrow bay to crash in final jerkings at his head.

"I had thought," said Daron slowly, "to see the temples of the Old Gods. I saw none near the bay front."

Shorhun barked, a laugh that seemed half cadaverous cough. "Talun's Temple moved first. It fell to pieces one night with a mighty roaring and cursing, a sound that satisfied my feelings in its depth and originality, if it did disturb me next day in seeing his retreat."

"Eh? Talun was driven from his temple?"

"Aye. The old sea lord brought down a storm that ripped up every tree and all the neatly planted gardens of the Temple Isle, but that stubborn basalt was a bit too much for him. The isle stood."

"But what drove him out?" Daron asked intently.

Shorhun barked—or coughed—again. "Incense," he said lugubriously. "Before Tan Lormus, High Priest of the Invisible Ones invented that, old Talun came near to driving out the pretty barges of the rich devotees of the Invisible Ones. Talun, like the true Old God he is, was using only natural things—though the number of fish that died on the beach that year was natural only by a wide stretch of allowance."

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Daron burst into a roar of laughter till the tears rolled down his leathery cheeks. "Praise be Talun! Now that was an idea well worthy of the sea rover's god, and may this Tan Lormus live again in a fish's body for his rupture of so fine a plan!"

"BUT Talun moved," sighed Shorhun. "And the others moved after him, one by one, till last of all sweet Lady Tammar moved. She lacked not for worshipers, even with the Invisible Ones, for, Invisible Ones or not, men and women yet must have love, and no fine thoughts or wise prophecy can satisfy in place of that."

"But—she moved? The bay, foul as it may be for a sailor's eye, might still, with a good round moon, be a goodly place in a lover's eye," said Daron.

"It was . . . it was. But Lady Tammar is strangest of the gods in many ways. Lady of Love, she is all loves, all things to all men. She is the strong adventurer's companion mate, as strong as he, and as faithful. She is the young man's first love, very young, and never wise. She is the mature man's wife—his ideal of her, understanding, wise, forever ready to aid him in his troubles. But—she is, too, the fop's simpering coquette, for she is the ideal of every man, however weak that ideal may be.

"So she moved back, back from the bay and its lack of common men in honest need. Lady Tammar had no joy in appearing thus to any man."

Daron sipped quietly at his wine. "I think," he said softly, "that I must see the new temple of Tammar."

Shorhun shook his great head slowly, and a little smile touched his face, changing it from the harsh look of weather-slit granite. "You can go—but Lady Tammar is wise. She does not appear to every man—for every man cannot find his perfect ideal, save in Tammar herself. And she is for no man. Once each month I go to her temple; three times she has appeared to me, and I go always in hopes. My wife is dead, and Tammar—

"But you can go."

"Are all the temples of the Old Gods near together?" asked Daron.

"Near together, yes. But some six miles beyond Tordu, six miles up the slopes of Mt. Kalun, looking out across the city to the sea beyond."

"I think that I shall go there, then. There are inns nearby?"

Shorhun shook his head slowly. "None nearer than Tordu. The Old Ones ruled it thus. Only the priests and priestesses and the temple people live on Mt. Kalun."

"Then this shall be my home. And—you have a tailor who could produce such fine brown breeches for me, perhaps?"

IV.

DARON sniffed, and his head nodded approval to the easy motion of the horse. There was incense here, on this road up Mt. Kalun, to the temples of the Old Gods—but incense he liked. The smell of spicy pine tar, baked from the tall, straight trees in the hot sun. The high air here was clear and crisp as a sea breeze, cleared by the luminous green masses of the trees.

The horse stopped abruptly, blew through his nostrils vigorously, and looked back at his rider. Daron laughed and patted the arching, sweaty neck. "Enough, my friend? A bit of climb it is. Good, then, it's near high noon, for all we started early. Tammar's temple has stood these good few years, and will, I think, wait while we rest. And Tammar . . . well, Lady Tammar has lasted longer still. We'll stop—and there's a nicely sheltered place." Daron slid off his mount, threw the reins over the animal's head, and led him off the trail. A hundred yards to the right, the pine-needle carpet of soft brown gave way to

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a little clearing, green with grass.

From the saddlebags, Daron lifted a flask of wine, wrapped in a dozen layers of crushed green leaves, wilted now and somewhat dried. But the wine within was pleasantly cooled. A loaf of bread, and a cut of meat was food enough, and Daron settled comfortably. The horse was browsing at the grass, and blowing annoyedly. He was a lowland horse, it seemed, and the effects of some seven thousand feet of altitude were puzzling to him.

Hidden beyond the stand of straight-trunked pines, the road that led up to the temples carried a sprinkling of other visitors—hardy countrymen and tough-muscled seamen, the common men who had the will and muscle, too, to climb that narrow track.

No carriage road—those who came this way did not from indolence and lack of other occupation, but because their minds and spirits drove them on. Daron, himself unseen, watched the steady, strong-backed walk of a man browned with the sun, hands dark with rich brown soil, bearing an offering of ripe, round melons slung in twin sacks across his shoulders.

"Now there," said Daron, his eyes closed down to slits of concentration,

The priest dropped forward, sprawling in death as Daron's long blade found his throat—and leaped up an instant later, to fight more madly than before!

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"goes a man who knows his mind. No fine-tongued orator would quickly move him to war—but, I would be loath to meet his kind as enemies."

A pair of sailors, the breeze bringing even here the good, round talisman of their calling and proof of the god they'd worship, went noisily up the trail, blowing, laughing, rolling slightly in their walk, spurring each the other with insults of his weakness. Blowing like a hard north gale on this small slope? The wine had washed away his strength!

"Gods," said Daron to himself, "have little need of help in working miracles—but these gods of Azun be strange gods. Why might a god call on a man for help? Why, to lead and work with other men. A god is no doubt, a mighty leader—but men and gods are different things. I'd fight for a god in whom I found just cause—but not behind such a one. There would seem to me a certain delicacy in the question. A man who leads against the enemy is credited not perhaps with skill, but in any case with more than jelly up his spine.

"But a god? An immortal god? Is courage needed for one who cannot die to face a deadly foe? And would such anomalous courage hearten those tough-minded farming men, or those strong, if odorous, fishers? Why, the god might be courage itself—but still lack proof, where he cannot die or feel steel cutting!

"So—perhaps this is a certain question of leading men against those foppish ones that rule Tordu. Foppish—but from the nice-kept stable yards I saw, well mounted. And your mounted cavalry is a savage thing for simple farming men to face, no matter how ill-trained the mounted man may be."

Daron looked out and down. Two giant old pines, their trunks scaled like yellow-brown bodies of gigantic, uprearing serpents, had throttled out lesser competition to the northeast. Between their mighty boles, Tordu was visible, a sprawl of white and green and pastel blues against the green-brows farming land. The sparkling blue of the bay, with the white-crowned Temple Isle across its mouth mocked up at him with tiny, bright-ribboned barges plying slowly back and forth, like water beetles crawling across a puddle on their oars.

Daron fingered a single silver coin tucked well down in one pocket, and looked down across the town. "Tammar I'll see—I think—for this bit of silver should be more than coin, keeping in mind its source. And gods do not favor mortals for naught, and if this Nazun, chief of Azuni's gods, sees fit to speak to me, why Tammar—"

He paused, his slit-narrow, night-blue eyes widening and easing away the straight furrows of concentration. Mixed visions swam before his mind—oval faces framed in spun-golden hair, with wide-opened eyes like sapphires staring out in seeming wonder, and black-haired heads, round and olive-skinned, with black-jet eyes. Tall bodies willowy slim, and lithe as temple dancers, figures strong and tall and fine, free-swinging, life-loving—

He shook his head and laughed. "No one—but part of all, perhaps. But Lady Tammar will know—and be, if Shorhun tells me right." He leaned back, eyes rising to the vaulted roof of interlacing, dark-green boughs.

A FOOTSTEP near brought his eyes down, and his hand shifted half an inch to reach in one flashing drive, if need should be, the long, well-balanced weapon at his side. His hand fell away, his eyes slitted down, then widened slowly as a smile overspread his tanned face.

"You are too late, good friend to me. My wine is gone, my meat and bread consumed—and I cannot repay a meal of some few evenings gone. But my accommodations here are good in many ways. The seats are soft, the needles pad them well, and keep away the

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ground's damp chill. Would you be seated?"

Nazun's gray eyes smiled, and his head nodded easily. His lean, muscular body folded down gracefully, till he was seated at the base of a mighty pine, facing Daron's curious eyes. Nazun's eyes flickered swiftly over horse, silver-mounted saddle, Daron's good and well-stitched clothing, and the jewel-hilted sword he carried. "A single coin has seeded well, since last we met."

Daron laughed easily. "One crop it raised—but the next night I found a planted pebble—planted beneath the shelter of three small snail shells—grew better still in the good soil of Azun."

Nazun's eyes laughed, and he nodded gravely. "Strange plants flourish well where the ground has not been sowed before. Yet the thing is very old."

"Perhaps," said Daron, "you could tell me its age?" He looked at Nazun's grave, unchanging face through narrowed eyes.

Nazun shook his head. "I've seen this earth somewhat longer than you, Daron, but that is older still. What legends of antiquity do your people know, Daron?"

Daron's eyes swung up to watch the bowing, swaying, stately dance of dark-green boughs against a clear-blue sky. His long, powerfully muscled figure looked relaxed and easy, his dark-green jacket blending here, and his gray-blue woolen breeches loose and floppy about well-corded legs. His face looked blankly easy—save for the eyes, where fine networks of tiny creases slitted down about the night-blue eyes peering upward at the noon-blue heavens.

"Legends? Legends—and this Nazun is no mortal man, but Lord of Wisdom. Now legends are for children's ears, it seemed to me, but—but I am not Lord of Wisdom." Daron's thoughts flashed swiftly over years and nations—and legends. A pattern formed abruptly in his mind, a pattern he'd never seen before, and with his understanding, he started so he moved and looked deep in Nazun's eyes.

"Now by the gods!" said Daron, soft-voiced. "I've seen a hundred nations, and heard a hundred tales, and spent long nights around the fires to the music of the ballads and the thrill of long-drawn legends. I've heard how Bummuer of the Tutz nations defeated Lacoor of the Parrys from the Tutz balladeers. And, two nights later, heard how, in that self-same battle, Lacoor of the Parrys drew Bummuer of the Tutz to follow his retreat, and trapped him—from a balladeer in Par.

"But in the Tutz ballads, and in those of the Parrys, in those of every nation I have met, there is one common basis of ancient, ancient legend, stories older than the histories of nations. Once men were gods—and flew in air. And men were gods, to ride on fire, beyond the air, and spoke with the voices of gods, heard across all Earth, from nation to nation, and they had thunderbolts of gods.

"But men were men—not gods. They flew on their wings, and loosed their thunderbolts at one another, till each had stripped all godhood from the other. And—men were men, and grubbed in ground again, and rode the air no more, but plodded earth on old Shank's mare.

"Now a man may lie, and, having taken council aforehand, a dozen men may lie, and lie alike. But when a hundred men, in a hundred nations, men who have never met, lie the same fine tale—there's more than lying there!"

NAZUN'S gray eyes twinkled, deep beneath their shadowing brows, and his head nodded lazily. "I've heard such legends among the peoples of Azuni—and one legend heard only here. That, when man stripped man of godlike powers, and the world rocked and heaved in torture to their thrusts, lands sank and new lands rose from the sea-

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beds. The island group that is Azun rose from the seas then, and some hundred peaceful men, who had certain wisdom of those things that made for godhood, took council. Now tell me, friend, if the nations tore like mad dogs at each other's throats and every nation was embroiled, and new lands rose from the sea—"

"I," said Daron, "would found a new nation on that untainted land."

Nazun nodded slowly, settled back against the tree and looked up to where a scarlet-breasted bird cocked wary eyes downward before he drew back his head to rap resounding tattoo on the great trunk. "Now," said Nazun, looking upward, "let us think what wise men might do—in days when the world was mad with bloodlust and mighty powers. Say you were such a refugee that settled here on Ator, largest of this Azun group."

His eyes wandered down again to rest on a hopping bird fighting with a stubborn worm. "That bird there, walks but he can fly, thanks to certain mechanism—a sort of machine that he was gifted with. Pity we have not that machine."

Daron cocked a squinted eye, and watched the bird triumphantly gobble quickly, ruffle his feathers, crouch and leap into the air. "I've tried a thousand times to do the same," the sea rover sighed. "I've seen coasts no ship could reach, and no walking man could find. And the bird flew in where I could not." He shrugged. "I could not make such mechanism."

"But once—men were, the legends say, near godlike—men might have had the wit for that, perhaps," suggested Nazun.

"Ah," said Daron softly, and watched the bowing, dancing, swirling limbs above his head. Thoughts flashed through his mind such as he'd never contemplated. Gods, or godlike, the legends said. But—if their godhood had rested in mechanisms, in cleverness of tool and trickery— That was a sort of godhood one could well strip away, as one force took the catapults of another, to leave them helpless, wandering in rout.

"They'd need," said Nazun's soft, almost dreaming voice, "most wonderful tools for that, no doubt. Better, finer tools than we. Springs, perhaps, of a steel better than we know, and mighty forges to make the steel."

The picture roiled and cleared in Daron's mind. That was the source of legend, then! They had been godlike, those men of old! But their godhood had rested in machines—and the tools to make the machines. Once smash those tools—and machines wore out, with no more tools to replace them—

"They," said Daron slowly, "had wit, perhaps, but, it seems, more trickery than godhood. Wit, knowledge—but no judgment, and wisdom is also judgment."

"Men's minds are strange, are they not, my friend? And little known. Had such ones, as these ancient legends speak of, known more of themselves, perhaps their godlike knowledge of the things they bent to toys might have made them gods indeed."

Daron looked closely at the pine-needle-strewn ground on which he sat, and thought. There was a story here—a further story. Gods did not speak to men to while away the time. There would be reward, perhaps, but also—when the affairs of gods were concerned, and mortal men were brought to enter—danger, adventure! "Had I escaped," said Daron softly, "from such a world, and founded on an island, unmolested, a new city, a new nation, having some remnant of that godlike knowledge—I think I would forget it. I think, perhaps, more knowledge of myself would make life worthier to myself. How does man think—and how go mad? Some say a demon enters the spirit of the mad, and some say only that his mind is sick, like the belly with a colic. And some

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are only queer, and, growing somewhat queerer, we say are mad.

"I know the thousand riggings of a hundred nations' ships—and know not how that knowledge lodges in my skull. I think, were I to build a new nation on the wreckage of that old, I'd learn myself a bit, before I tried the rebuilding of such powers as once destroyed men."

"And wait, before you learned again those things, till every man in all the race had judgment enough to carry burning brands through the granary of man without setting fire? Wait, as the ages passed, till there was not, and never would be again, a madman to loose the spark? Yes," said Nazun softly, "that would be—safe, at least."

Daron laughed, and nodded slowly. "Safe," he chuckled, "and stupid, as the turtle in his shell. We need— Oh," said Daron suddenly, and looked at Nazun with a sudden, whelming understanding. "Man needs a *god, or godlike guide who acts, who interferes to direct man upward as he longs, and halt the downward settling of his urge!*"

Nazun moved easily, his long, blue-green-clad body rippling lithely to whip-cord muscles under tanned and healthy skin. "Man needs his ideals personified, made real and given power. Given power enough, indeed, to stop the individual man who errs, but judgment enough to spare the man who sees ahead. One who is not man—for man is jealous of man, and unyielding to man's suggestions."

DARON sat very still, and concentrated on the brown soft mass of needles at his feet. "A mighty plan," he sighed. "And if man, through centuries, learned once to rule the rest of the world with godlike powers, perhaps through other centuries he might learn to rule himself. But how, I wonder, might it be?"

"The compass needle points to north, drawn by a thread of force unseen, unfelt by men. The brain of man is made of many tiny parts, working one against the other, millions on millions of them, by threads of force like the force that moves the compass needle, perhaps. A somewhat different force, more akin to the sparks that come from combing hair on cold, dry nights, it might be. If these small parts—these cells—act thus against each other, and it is their interaction, not the cells themselves, that is thought, then it is the force the cells generate, *and not the cells themselves,* which is thought."

"Yes," said Daron, his eyes narrowed and alert on those bottomless gray wells of Nazun's eyes. "And—the force that is the interaction is not material, as invisible as the fine thread of pull that turns the compass needle."

Nazun relaxed, and his eyes wandered from Daron's, as though the important story were told. "If these things were true, men might then learn to make those interactions that are thought self-existent, apart from the material of the cells. A group of many men, wise and learned, might cause a concentration of such forces to take an independent existence, a self-thinking, immaterial thought. It would be—almost godlike."

"It would be the essence of man—his ideals, without his needs, his heights, without his weakness."

"And the minds of many men might mold and build it better, nearer to human kind, while yet it had the power to reject, by my own judgment, the wrong in men.

"With such—man might go onward safely, for such a guardian of man, could guide and aid men."

"Why"—Daron halted, licked his lips with tip of tongue, and rephrased his thought. If Nazun wished indirection, there might be reason, must be reason here—"if such a thing should be attained, say . . . five centuries ago—"

"Perhaps seven and a half," suggested Nazun.

"—or so long as seven and a half cen-

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turies ago, then men so protected might advance that knowledge of material things once more in safety. It seems to me, they would."

"But if," said Nazun, "some twelve long centuries had passed since Azun first was settled, and twelve long centuries of vilifying those studies had established strong tradition— And does the young man choose the stony hillside, though it have rich and virgin soil beneath the rocks, when the proven, fertile soil of the valley is there?

"Daron, where would you start the search for facts that lead to knowledge that might make men fly again?"

"Why . . . with birds."

"There is a tradition, I have heard, handed down from the days of legends. It is very strong, and probably true. The way to flight is not the way of the birds. The wings men fly upon must not move."

"I'd like," said Daron dryly, "to study this science of the mind."

"So many did. But that is gone—since the Invisible Ones came."

"These thought-force things might be invisible, might they not?"

"But, being thought," Nazun said, lazily turning to shade from the shifting sun, "might make themselves have form in man's mind."

"But any form!" said Daron softly, thinking suddenly of Lady Tammar, who was, so Shorhun said, every man's ideal, but not for any man.

"But why should they? These gods—men are men; they are limited as men, and cannot truly conceive of a god, can they? It is not logic. To imbue a god with human qualities is basic contradiction. They are more than human, and hence, by definition, not human. A human, then, could not conceive them. A god should see the future, and be possessed of absolute logic."

"The logic is sound," Daron nodded, eyes narrowed, "but the logic of a wise man of Tharsun, in the Tutz nation, was sound, too. It was logic that a heavy rock should drop much faster than a light one. It doesn't, incidentally. I had him show me, by test, the soundness of his proof.

"A god such as you describe might be a god! I could not know. But he'd be a poor neighbor, with his absolutes. The laws of nature are absolute, and logical. But I've seen a small child thrust its hand into the pretty glow of molten brass—and be punished with the absolutes of nature's laws."

NAZUN shrugged. "I repeat the logic of the priests of the Invisible Ones. They have no root in human brain—though they draw their powers from the tiny generators of the force of thought that make up human brains. They live by the energies of the thoughts their worshipers give. But their root and existence lies within a . . . crystal ball, a thing some three feet through."

Daron stiffened where he lay. "That is material?"

"It is material, and may be crushed by a blow."

Daron knew, that instant, what his task must be. "Where might this crystal be?"

"On the Temple Isle—but no one knows. The Invisible Ones guard that knowledge—with certain reason. But it is not readily seen, nor wisely seen. The priests of the Invisible Ones, the Invisible Ones themselves—and the sphere itself. Three defenses make it safe."

"The sphere—"

"It is a sphere of clearest crystal, three feet through, and in its heart a myriad of pin-point bits of light flash and weave a pattern, weaving, moving, dancing, lights of every color moving, lights that come and fade—"

Daron nodded, and shivered slightly.

"I . . . I saw a thing of similar nature. And thereby came near to being no more! A certain wizard of the Tahly folk showed me it, and, but for a friend,

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I'd be standing paralyzed before him yet! He learned, though, and taught me certain things. Hypnotism, where the mind is slaved!"

Nazun nodded. "It's strong defense, a final barrier. It was not meant so originally, but meant only as the basis of the Invisible Ones, its weaving lights their patterned thoughts, and, being mechanism, they are uninfluenced by anything but logic."

Daron snorted softly. "Cold comfort in such gods as that!"

"No comfort—but knowledge."

"Useless knowledge, if what I hear be truth."

"Useless—but satisfying, at times. To know the result of tomorrow's deeds. The Invisible Ones are there, that knowledge can be had. No good it can do, for, being truth, it can't be changed. But—a young man's wife is suffering in labor—and he can know the true result, two lives—or none! Or a child is sick, and the father sleepless with prodding fear, which might—and the Invisible Ones know—be needless.

"A day, you'll stay away, not caring greatly for that ultimate knowledge, what day and hour Lord Barak has closed your book—but a month, a year, a dozen years. The knowledge is there—"

Daron nodded. "No man has will to fight such steady pull forever. And once indulged—the man's mind and will is trapped. Aye—that is logic, but lacks ideals. But—I wonder if the Invisible Ones"—Daron looked at Nazun's cragged face through narrowed lids—"could tell me when *I* shall die? Or —when they shall die?"

"They cannot. The course of a man is straight through time, from past to future, basing actions of the present on the memories and knowledge gained in the past. But a god acts on his knowledge of the past and future! That is chaos—and cannot be predicted. And those of men who associate themselves with gods—cannot be predicted."

Daron's eyes looked upward again. The lowering sun was casting longer rays, and the zenith sky was dark, deep blue, with the clarity of high mountain air. The darkening branches wove across the spot of sky, and whispered soft accompaniment to eager, anxious birds. A three-foot crystal ball with moving, weaving, hypnotic lights. A material thing that a blow could smash —but which, because it was material, no immaterial thing could harm!

Daron's eyes swept down—and widened sharply. The tree across the way swayed gently to the breeze, but Nazun was gone. There was a helmet where he had sat, a thing of woven wires of silver and gold, wires fine and soft as young lamb's wool, and five strange jewels. A blue-green, queerly luminous bit of stuff lodged at the front, a bit of stone that matched in color Nazun's garb. A bit of stone like agate, red-streaked and white, above the right ear, a bit of rose quartz above the left, and a sea-green crystal at the rear.

At the peak, a blob of utter night made solid was fixed in the fabric of the weave. "Barak, Lord of Fate and Death," said Daron softly. "And the others—Talun's sea-green, my Lady Tammar's rose, and Martal's streaked stone, Lord Martal's Stone of Chance."

Abruptly, as he settled it upon his head, it occurred to him that immaterial forces such as thought did not ordinarily move weighty gold and silver.

Slowly he caught up the reins of his browsing horse and mounted. Lost in thought, he nodded gently to the motion of the animal, and wondered further how it might be that clouds should form, and a howling storm move up at the behest of a wholly immaterial Talun. And puzzled at how much of a full, round truth Nazun had seen fit to gift him with.

A good hour later he roused, and looked about—and cursed himself for a fool. The horse, in natural course, had found the going easier down the moun-

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tainside. The temples, and Lady Tammar, were far above, and for this day, he must wait.

V.

THE SUN was set, and the moon well up, a round, pale lantern of lies, pretending to light the city of Tordu, when Daron turned down the cobbled street toward Shorhun's inn. The moon's light was a snare and a deception, as Daron well knew; it lied about the colors of the walls, saying that dirt-streaked muddy yard wall there was touched with silver paint, and that yonder wall was built of glinting gold. Daron well knew it was blue-tinged plaster, and the black tiled roof was bright green by day.

And the shadows, where only low voices and soft laughter originated, were people—though the moon would not reveal it. Deceptive. The glow of light on walls and streets, smelling with the faint and blended odors over which prevailed the queer, wet scent of water poured on hot stone cobbles and lawns at sunset. The little trees and sunken entrances casting shadows sharp and black, the narrow, canyon alleyways black gouges through the twisting buildings of the section.

Daron was deep in thought—but Daron had visited more nations than one, and, in most, he'd found an eye that didn't sleep of more than slight aid for long and healthy life. The black shadow of an entrance arch, cut through a high plastered garden wall, spouted figures, two clumps of shadow that ran, topped with white blobs of faces, and lightening with moon-glimmer on steel.

The horse reared and screamed and twisted round in panic as Daron's sharp spurs raked his sides in a way he'd not known since this new master mounted him. He lurched and pawed forward—and the two shadows ducked aside from the sharp shod hoofs. Daron was off on the far side of the horse. The animal snorted once, and felt his rider gone. Startled, hurt, he clattered away. Daron was on his feet, balancing lightly in the shadow of the wall, while the two shadows turned to face him. Full moonlight struck at them now, while the walls high shadow engulfed and blotted out clear sight of Daron's figure.

"Right!" said a low voice, and one of the pair leaped to Daron's right, the other to his left. They wore cloaks of some dark stuff, and cowls that snugged about their heads. The cloaks hung close about them, no hindrance now as they came on mincing, dancing feet, and lunged, a trained chorus that attacked from two sides at once.

Daron blotted out in shadow, and was behind the one as he spun on his heel. His cloak swirled loose at the hem, and the moon-glimmer of his sword reached up—and fouled in it. Moonlight silvered on his face, a lean, bony face with hollow, blackened eyes and line-thin lips that writhed in blazing anger. Daron's sword licked out, twisted neatly round the fouled weapon, and sent it flying, a glinting fragment of light, across the garden wall. Somewhere beyond, it landed with a ringing clang.

"Hold!" said Daron sharply. "I have no enemies here."

The second man danced forward, his face lifting in a smile of keenest pleasure as his blade darted under Daron's momentarily lifted sword. Daron's body shifted slightly at the final instant—and the blade bent double as it scraped on the thin steel plate beneath the sea rover's jacket at the breast.

The cowled man danced back as Daron's blade came down, a soft-voiced, vicious snarl on his lips. The second man was circling, his cloak stripped off in an instant's time and wrapped about his left arm, the glint of a dirk in his right hand.

"So be it, then!" Daron snapped. "I *had* no enemies here!"

"And," the sword bearer whispered,

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"you will have none—for the dead have neither friend nor foe!"

DARON slipped aside, backed toward the wall as he caught the other's sword on his own, the swift wrist play making the steel *thrum* and sing and the close, keen following of blade on blade making scarce a click of contact. Daron danced and moved and wove, and watched the moon-whitened faces of his attackers. They were twins, twin meal-white faces with twin sooted, shadowed eyes. But one stood forth in lighter clothing, loose trousers gathered at the calf to tight stocking breeches, loose jacket hanging below the waist. But each arm carried an armlet of jewel-glinted metal, and across the breast was woven a pattern of sphere and many jewels stitched on.

Daron danced back and back, feeling out the swordsman, and knowing in the spring and slash of the blade he faced this was one who'd handled weapons before, and handled well. He moved and danced and backed away, and the dirk-man, short of reach with his small blade, circled helplessly.

Daron moved forward in a deceptive glide that seemed scarce motion, and twisted as he moved. The long, thin blade lunged out, flicked once, and laid open his opponent's arm from wrist to elbow. A soft, thick inhalation of pain, and whispered curse; the cloaked one held his blade in his left hand, and charged in for revenge. Daron backed, circled left to avoid the lunge of the dirk. His twisting, glimmering blade lunged out once more and buried in the swordsman's throat. An instant's scream was throttled in a rush of blood, and the sword dropped down to ring on cobbled pavement.

Simultaneously, as Daron freed his blade, the dirk rang on the street, and the second man had swept up the fallen sword. Daron leaped forward, and in the engagement wrapped his blade about the base of the other's, and sent it flying. His own straightened out, and hovered near the jewel-sprinkled breast.

"Now how is this, my jeweled dandy, that you seek strangers for your murdering? Would not wisdom suggest you know your victim and his capabilities before you practice up on assassination? I have no knowledge of your laws here, but there is one of mine I think good. Who attacks me is an enemy—or gives good account of why he sought me out. Speak, and speak truth!"

The moon-whitened face was moveless, the thin, straight lips held shut. He faced the moon now, and the shadowed eyes were lighted, gleaming fish-belly white against the face. They shifted minutely—and Daron leaped aside and whirled.

The sword he had just thrown with his blade licked past his shoulder like metal lightning. The man whose throat Daron had spitted whirled, and leveled the blade for a second attack as the other swooped to retrieve the dirk, glowing like molten silver on the cobbles.

Daron fell back in clumsy coverage, and stared at the throat of the man that faced him. It bubbled blood, and the loose-hung mouth worked and dribbled blood that looked like ink under the moon's rays.

Daron cursed softly, and engaged the dead man's blade. It swept and swung and danced to meet his every move. It glinted like a sweep of sunlit rain, a thousand lines of steel in place of one. Daron danced back, drew back his arm as the dead man lurched forward clumsily, blood bubbling through slow-formed words. "Stand still, fool, you die!"

Daron's arm swept downward, and his sword fled hilt-foremost toward the dead, white face. The dead man's sword swept up too slow, and the heavy hilt crashed true across his eyes, with all the strength of Daron's arm behind it.

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The priest was dead—stabbed through the throat—and fought on! Savagely Daron's blade licked out to sever the sword hand from its wrist.

THE SECOND attacker lunged in, grasped Daron's sword before it fell, and reached out for Daron's dancing form. The dead thing squalled, raked at blinded eyes, and twisted vainly. Barely, Daron retrieved the blind thing's sword and danced away with skin still whole.

"Men," said Daron tensely, "I'll fight fair—but when the fairly killed come back again—why, there's an end to fairness!"

"You'll die," the rustling, laughing whisper of the other assured him. His cloaked arm reached, and suddenly, as the two blades engaged, grasped Daron's sword. Daron released the blade, dropped his hand to his dirk before the other, expecting a frantic pull, recovered balance. The dagger flashed, spun through the air, and buried in the bejeweled man's face. He screamed, and stumbled forward, dropping the two

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blades he held to claw at the dagger.

Daron whipped up his own blade from the street, and slashed coldly at the fallen man's throat, then stood back.

Like uncoiling springs, the hands snatched out the dagger, drew it back and hurled it toward Daron's own throat. The watchful sword rang against it, and sent it dancing down the street.

The thing stood up and stared at him with blank, dead eyes.

"You die," it said. "You must—for I cannot!" The words were whistling, nasal, but half formed. The slashed throat whistled and moaned as air sucked in and out.

"You cannot die," Daron agreed with cold, live things squirming in his belly, "but blind, you cannot see!" The sword he held danced out again, swept, parried, darted in—and in a second time. Daron stepped back, his blade lowered, to watch the blinded thing—and almost died on the lunging blade!

Desperately, the sea rover met the blade that danced and lunged and parried at his own, a dead, blind thing seeking out his every move and driving him back—back—with tireless speed, while lead flowed down Daron's veins and settled in his wrist. "Nazun—Lord Nazun," Daron whispered softly, "I ask no help in things I know, I ask no help in doing—but give me knowledge to stop this *thing!*"

The swords sang and danced and winked, and soft leather sandals scraped on cobblestones—and Daron felt the blade come nearer. Air whistled in the dead throat, and in his own dry throat, and he glanced sharply at the corpse that lay outstretched beside the dirk—and wondered when it would again arise!

Daron's breath sucked in in sudden understanding. For an instant, the leaden load of tiring muscles lightened with glimpse of relief. His defense grew bolder, then attack that wrapped the dead thing's blade gave him the chance he sought. His own blade lunged forward again as he twisted—and laid open the dead thing's arm from wrist to elbow. The severed tendons dropped the blade, and as the other arm swept down, a slashing cut at the left wrist left it with useless fingers.

"You may not die, you may not blind," Daron panted hoarsly, "but those hands will grip no more!"

The dead man dropped like an emptied sack, lay limp an instant in the street and, as Daron watched, the limbs stiffened in rigor.

COLD gnawed at the sea rover's brain as he walked silently down the street his horse had vanished in, rubbing the tired muscles of his forearm. This section of the city was quiet as those men had at last become, the silvering of the moon alone remaining. Somewhere the low voices and the laughter had vanished. Only far away across the still rustle of trees in the night wind came sounds of city's movement, the restless, rustling tone that rises and falls and never dies while a city lives. The smell of flower gardens and fresh salt air swept from the bay on the wings of the inshore breeze. But no sound nearby.

Then, a block away, he heard the hesitating *clop-clop* of a shod horse's hoofs, the irregular rhythm of an unridden horse, uncertain of its way, feeling the weight of loneliness lacking human guidance. Daron started toward the sound, loping silently, his mind skipping agilely, yet numbed withal, and bewildered mightily. His enemy was clear—for none but a god could make those dead things dance to their strings. But his friends—

Or had he thought that solution for himself? Had his own mind seen clear the ripped arm of the abandoned corpse, and the reason lying there for its desertion? It was no more than he had done before—save that that dead, blind face opposing him with inhuman skill had frozen and numbed his thoughts be-

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yond any experience he had ever known.

He thrust the thing to the back of his mind, and turned down a narrow street. His great gray stallion tossed its head uneasily, and faced him, whickering uncertainly. "So, boy, it's easy now. I raked you then to save you from being spitted. Come, now—it hurt, I know, but a foot man does not fight a mounted man, but first his horse. Come—ah! Daron swung up, and soothed the uncertain animal to an easy walk, and guided him once more toward the inn. But the sea rover's eyes kept sharper watch than ever they had at a good ship's bow.

VI.

THE HANGING lamp was dark, with charred and smoking wick, and Shorhun's lanky figure draped uneasily in the fireside chair, asleep and snoring gently. His long, lean arms, like knotted ropes, hung loose beside the chair, his fingers half opened to the glow of the dying fire. Across the room, the boy was curled upon a bench, head pillowed on an elbow, and one long arm, a small duplicate of Shorhun's knotted cables, reached down to grip in lax fingers a dog's collar.

The dog looked up abruptly, with wide-opened eyes as Daron's horse *clopped* softly in the courtyard, and the creak and grunt of leather harness attested to the stabling of the horse. His silent eyes watched Daron enter the room. He snorted softly, and lowered his massive head upon his paws, eyes watchfully awake.

Daron rubbed his arm and smiled. Softly he stepped over to Shorhun, and laid a friendly hand upon his arm. The lanky innkeeper moved and raised his head.

"Daron?" he said, his voice mechanical and toneless with broken sleep.

"Aye, Daron—and with a throat as dry as Fraka's plains. And— But get me wine, my friend."

Shorhun heaved up, and ambled toward his supply, to return with a bottle and a glass on a small tray. He set the lot before Daron, and slumped into his chair, resting his head within his palms.

"Ho, am I to drink alone? Come, Shorhun, another glass, and join me in it. And tell me, is it customary for this town that men should seek to murder strangers on sight?"

Shorhun raised himself, and fetched another glass. "No," he said tonelessly, pouring wine into the two.

Daron looked up into the lank, tired man's eyes. He was quiet for a moment as he watched the eyes, and watched Shorhun pick up the glass. Then his strong, brown fingers gripped Shorhun's wrist and stayed the hand. "Wait, friend. I think—I think your lamp needs oil, and I need light, I know. I would not drink until I see the color of my wine."

Shorhun moved wordlessly to do the task, pulling down the counterweighted lamp, filling the reservoir, trimming the wick and lighting it so that the room was warm with yellow light.

Daron's fingers were busy then with an aimless spinning of a bit of polished metal on a cord, a polished metal mirror that spun first one way, then the other. "Sit here," said Daron, as the innkeeper finished, "and listen, friend. I have a tale to tell."

Wearily, Shorhun sat down across the table, and Daron began. His voice was low and soft, and he described his start that morning, following Shorhun's directions, and Shorhun's sleepy eyes were watching the dancing, spinning mirror on the cord, and the swirling reflections of the lamp that danced with it.

"Once before," said Daron softly, in a sleepy voice, "I traveled such a hill-climbing road, to the dwelling of a wizard of the Ind people. I was tired as you are tired, and wanted sleep—as you want sleep—the rest and ease of sleep—sleep—sleep—"

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Daron's voice was toneless, sleepy—but his eyes were bright and hard, and the mirror in the lamplight spun and spun, and hesitated to spin the other way at the end of its cord. "Sleep you need—sleep—" Shorhun's sleepy eyes sank lower, then abruptly tried to rise, his body seemed to struggle to rise, his head to turn from the mirror. "You hear only my voice, as you sleep—sleep—and forget all other things, but see the mirror that tires your eyes and makes you sleep. Shorhun, you hear only your friend, Daron, Daron who, like you, seeks only the Old Gods. You hear no voice but mine, and obey me in all things. You obey me, and only me, Shorhun!"

THE tonelessness was gone, and there was the whip of sharp command in Daron's tone—and the mirror spun. "You will and must answer any question I ask. That is true!"

"Y-yes," said Shorhun.

"I am your friend, and friend to your friends."

"Yes," said Shorhun promptly.

Daron's eyes were tense and dark. Very softly to himself, he whistled a little tune, and thought. "Now this is clear; someone has been here and worked upon this man, and thanks be to old white-headed Barhamu for what he taught me in the hills of Ind! But what is the purpose? No god did this, for the look of his eyes in good close view was clumsy revelation. But a man—if Barhamu knew enough to match at all these god-making wizards of Azun—cannot make another do what that other would object to—such as murdering his friends!"

Daron thought deeply, then; "Shorhun," he snapped, "is this wine good?"

"Y-yes," said Shorhun, and stirred uneasily, his forehead careworn and weather-browned, wrinkling in a frown of childish puzzlement.

"Shorhun, there was a stranger here who laid commands on you?"

Shorhun's face worked, his mouth moved and knotted and fell still. Daron nodded grimly. "But that stranger, while no god, knew this mind art well. Now how to break that spell—"

A thought came to him, and he rose. "Shorhun," he snapped, "sit there, and do not move until I return." Then, thinking of certain things that lay upon a cobbled street—"Or," he added—"until the sun rises and the day is here."

Daron strode out the door, and sought down the road. It was half an hour before he returned, swearing softly, with a mewing cat in his arms. His clothes were torn somewhat, and stained with varicolored plaster dust from climbing many walls.

He set the cat upon the table stroking it. "Shorhun," he said softly, "I know. You can tell me, because I know these things already. The stranger came, and talked with you, and laid command on you to forget. But you were to give to me this wine, and do whatever was needed that I might drink it."

"Yes," said Shorhun, uneasily. "It is good wine. The flavor is better than my own."

"Watch," commanded Daron. He spilled a bit of wine, and forced some down the cat's unwilling throat. The cat mewed and spit and scratched, and, released, sat down and cleaned its fur. Daron waited patiently. Abruptly the cat jumped, doubled up, screeched in agony—then straightened down with ruffled fur to lick itself clean. Two minutes later it doubled up again, screeched louder, and writhed unhappily. The spasm stopped, to resume again within a minute more.

Within five minutes the cat was dead, in one last spasm wherein its cries were choked in a muscle-knotted throat, and its muscles convulsed so violently the broad abdominal muscles ripped themselves across in frightful spasm, and every muscle tore, so that the carcass

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was a loose bag of death wrapped up in skin.

Softly Daron spoke. "That is the wine you would have fed your friend, Shorhun. That is the wine you would have drunk with me! That is murder in its foulest form!"

Shorhun shuddered, his face worked in knotted muscles, and his staring eyes twitched and danced. Abruptly he shook himself, and stumbled erect. "Eh? Daron! You here? Eh—it's night!"

Daron leaned up and looked and nodded, smiling. "Aye, it's night, my friend, and you may thank a man you never knew, one Barhamu, that you and I live now, and are not—that!"

Shorhun looked at the body of the cat, then picked it up and dropped it sharply in disgust, rubbing his hands as though they were contaminated by the contact. "What . . . what is this? And where is that dandied priest of the Invisible Ones that visited me here?"

"Ah, now the tale appears! I thought it might. Now listen to me, friend, and in the future look not so keenly at spinning mirrors, glittering jewels, or other tricks of wizards. I'll tell you something of a tale to straighten up that knotted hair of yours, but first bring me some wine—some wine of your own, and no more of this hell's brew. In the meantime, I sense a bit of trickery in your son's sleep."

AN HOUR later, Daron was dreaming. Now even one with the easygoing conscience and the tough stomach that Daron had, dreams now and then, but no such dream as this. He dreamed, and, moreover, knew he was dreaming.

For that last hour before he went to bed, the helmet of woven gold-and-silver wire beside him, he had been thinking as he talked with lanky, grimly boiling Shorhun. With half his mind he'd told his tale, and explained many things to Shorhun that he had learned in a high, dry old building far up the slopes of the shattered mountains of the Ind. And with the other, deeper half of his mind, he had been thinking, stewing about one problem; the problem of the sphere.

The menace of iron and flesh and blood that was the priests of the Invisible Ones, he set aside. *That* sort of menace he had known before, and would know again—with luck! But the Invisible Ones themselves? That, it seemed, was in the immaterial, potent province of the Lord Nazun. But the sphere—

A single strong blow could smash it—but to see it was to be paralyzed. His keen, smoothly working mind was baffled, brought solid and firm against a thing that, he knew, was the one thing in all the world against which it could not fight effectively; itself. Too long and well had old Barhamu taught him for self-deception here. The trick of the Spinning Mirror and the Trick of the Winking Light were, alike, tricks that no mind could well resist—for they were tricks that turned that mind upon itself.

And then the dream had come, as he sought sleep. He stood before an altar of blue-green beryl, a mighty, perfect gem four feet high, by three feet square, his head bowed down in prayer. Behind the altar stood Nazun, his gray eyes deep as night, with unplumbed depths so vast that the lack of bottom made them black. The eyes drew up his bowed head, till his own blue eyes looked into them, and through them, swallowed by them—and saw with the eyes of Nazun!

His sight hurled out cross the night, driving out through walls of blue-green stone, through the dark, whispering forests of the mountain, across the city, where Tordu lay dark beneath the setting moon, with only here and there some late light gleaming. The world was a painted map, luminous with moonglow and the Bay of Tordu was a lake of quicksilver, with the black comma of

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the Temple Isle. For half an instant the world held in suspense; then, as though his point of sight had plunged like a falling meteor, the Temple Isle exploded upward, turned black and silver as buildings appeared, exploded outward, and his sight penetrated through. For an instant of time he was deep, deep within the heart of one, deep in a room whose black walls, carved from the living basalt of the isle's foundations, were lighted with a glow that seemed pure white.

A circle of warrior guards stood round the sphere, the three-foot sphere of crystal, like a fragile bubble floating in a three-clawed rest of gold. Uncounted myriads of pin-point lights circled in darting, swooping, patterned orbits, a mathematically precise involvement of inextricable cycles and epicycles, progressions and ordered, intricate orbits. The row of warrior guards stood firm about the sphere—but every back was toward it, and every guard stood with hand on sword and metal shield.

In a fraction of a second—then the vision was gone, chopped off with a hollow sensation of frightful fall that gripped and wrenched at Daron's mind and soul.

His mind retched and quivered in terror—then quieted as some vast thing of calm laid fingers on it, soothing, stilling. And Daron stood again before the blue-green altar gem of beryl. Lord Nazun stood behind it, and his gray eyes were tensed and tired, his strong-muscled hands leaned on the altar top, gripping it, it seemed, for support. The tanned, rough-hewn face of the Lord of Wisdom was white with strain, and very tired.

Lord Nazun's voice was tired and strained as it whispered in the dream. "The Invisible Ones are wary; they cut off the vision soon. No further sight of that can I afford, for the cost is more than human mind could understand. But you have seen. Now—sleep again, and think!"

VII.

DARON sipped fragrant *feya*, and watched the sun shadows play in the courtyard with drowsy eyes. The sounds of Tordu City were waking round him: the cries of women, the shrill voice of a small boy carrying on conversation with some friend two blocks away, the heavy creak of a laden ox-cart plodding toward the market, bearing round, green melons and green-wrapped ears of corn.

Behind the drowsing eyes, the vision of the sphere danced and spun and moved, the myriad lights flashed in their orbit there, and, despite the strong protection of Nazun's mighty will, half hypnotized him still. Slowly, to Daron's inward gaze, one fact was forming from the vision. Those myriad points of light moved not aimlessly, but with an order more precise than the swinging, ticking pendulum of the clock upon the wall. They looped and moved and danced—in ordered, plotted curves.

And abruptly Daron started. The drowsing eyes became alive, and the immobile face moved in a sudden, grim smile. He laughed softly, and swung to his feet. Shorhun, sitting silent at his table looked up, and opened sleepy eyes.

"Ten minutes more, my friend," the lanky innkeeper sighed, "and for all your concentration I'd have broken in. I have a question of some small moment I would ask."

Daron laughed, and swung his sword belt round to greater comfort. "Then ask away, Shorhun, for one cactus-spined and triply damned question that's festered in my mind is solved, perhaps I can solve yours."

The innkeeper unfolded upward and shrugged. "It was merely this. I live today, because your eyes do more than see, and your brain holds more than most. But—I know not your plans, of

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course, but if they do not include your death within some three hours, I'd advise you seek some other seat."

"Hm-m-m. My plans did not include quite that," Daron nodded. He cocked a half-closed eye at Shorhun's ugly, solemn face. "But why should this seat —a very comfortable one seeming—be so sadly dangerous?"

"The priests of the Invisible Ones know it's here. If half your tale of last evening be true, then you murdered one priest. If it be wholly true, then you did murder enough to bring down the wrath of all the Invisible Ones on a dozen men."

Daron grunted softly. "They are slow to anger, then. I'd act without thinking over the problem a whole night through."

Shorhun nodded. "They would. But King Elmanus wouldn't. And it's King Elmanus' word that's needed. He wakes at eight, breakfast at eight and a half, and holds no audience before nine and a half. It's nine and a quarter now."

Daron looked up at Shorhun with interest. "Now if this King Elmanus has these haughty priests of the Invisible Ones trained so well to leave his sleep alone, he holds my strong respect. He is unique among the monarchs of the world I've seen; he can make a high priest wait as high priests should, until he's had his breakfast. What potent secret does he hold for this?"

SHORHUN sighed. "Old Elmanus is near eighty years old now, and he's reigned for fifty-five. For fifty-five long years, the Old Gods' priests have howled in his left ear, and for fifty-five long years the priests of the Invisible Ones have shrieked into his right.

"It's reached a sorry state, where now he can hear very little in either ear, and not at all when he is sleeping. But he has curiously sensitive hearing to the wail of countrymen and seamen both. His nobles he hears continuously, wherefore he need not listen hard to them."

"I'd think," said Daron shrewdly, "the priests would have found another king."

Shorhun chuckled. "Old Elmanus has not the slightest fear of death. He's lived too long, and during that life the two sets of gods have grown apart and hatred grown between. Now each fears a new king more than they loathe the old."

"Has neither worked on the will of Elmanus' successor?"

"Elmanus has no son, and his daughter is a priestess of Lady Tammar—but no woman may hold the throne. His successor must be elected."

"He'd be a noble, and the nobles—so you say—are all besotted with the future knowledge of the Invisible Ones."

"He'd be no noble," said Shorhun sourly. "The nobles all know well that several hundred exceedingly tough seamen loathe their blood and bones, and several thousand countrymen obey old Elmanus blindly because he's just."

"Hm-m-m . . . it would make a throne as hot as the Sun's own fires! But—perhaps I'd best be on my way. Where would you suggest?"

"It depends upon your plans," said Shorhun, shrugging like a beaching wave. "If you intend permanent escape from Elmanus' guard I'd say your own land would be a sound place to seek. If for a day—start west, and I'll say north. They'll find you, though."

Daron rose, stretched mightily, and started through the door. "Call up that imp you name your son, and have him fix my horse. I saw a watchmaker's place two blocks away, and I have business there."

"I'll call my son, but my memory is short. He may remember long enough to bring the horse to Granner's place." Shorhun vanished through the kitchen door.

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THE SUN was warm, and the breeze that slid joyously down the mountainside was fresh with pine-laden scent, and the smell of many breakfasts pleasant to the nostrils. The cobbles, round beneath the feet, were easy walking, and Daron's eyes alert as he swung down the street. Two blocks away he came upon the little doorway that he sought, signed without by a huge wooden cog bearing the symbols "WATCHMAKING."

The place was dark, and cool still with last night's air, and the watchmaker that looked up at him a half-seen figure in the gloom. His head was bald and polished as the faces of his products, but fringed around with a halo of white hair so fine it floated in the air. His face was a wizened, dried-up apple, split by a smiling mouth, and sharp blue eyes as old as the skies, and laughing with them.

"And what is time and timepiece to one as young as ye?" he snapped as Daron entered.

"Father, I am touched by a strange malady. The malady is never fatal, I am told, but long enduring," Daron said solemnly. "This malady some call inventor's itch."

The bright-blue eyes speared up at him. "Huy-hu, now. Unless this thing you have invented is the size and crudeness of an ox cart those fingers of yours will never make it."

"Alas, father, they won't." Daron sighed. "Yours will, though, I suspect."

"I've work enough with things I know, and things that work, without befuddling my old head with foolishness. What have you in mind?"

"A thing about the size of a pocket watch, but of special and strange making. Now look you here, for all my handling of ships cordage, still my fingers have certain skill at drawing things, and this is what I'd need. I'll pay you for it with twice its weight in gold, and add another weight if it be done by the third hour of the afternoon."

Rapidly Daron sketched, and the old watchmaker's keen eyes followed him. A dozen sketches, and many special strictures and explanations were demanded, but at last the old man snorted understanding.

"That malady you call inventor's itch, we call more often madness. The thing is mad, and has no use, but I shall make it as you say. You'll have it by the second hour after noon."

"Good," said Daron. "Now here is proof of my madness, for I'll give you now the gold." Four round, hard coins he laid on the old man's desk and stepped outside, where Shorhun's freckled son lounged by his horse.

"My father says," the boy whispered softly, giving him the reins, "that guards are popping out of ash receivers, and springing up among the flowers. I'm going to the house of my grandmother for a week or so. Good-by."

Daron stood an instant in thought, then stepped around the corner of the building where the lad had vanished to take him on his way. Two legs scrambling over a roof top disappeared as Daron turned the corner, and the lad was lost.

SHRUGGING, Daron set off across the town, his mind busy with his plans. Deeper and deeper into the city he went, stopping once at an inn where he was not known. Two hours later—the loungers there had learned a certain respect for three snail shells and a pebble that made longer stay uneconomic—Daron sought out a small tailor's shop, and took off his hands some misfit clothes that reeked in Daron's nostrils of earthy sweat. But, at least, they did not betray the seaman's origin.

For three long hours more he visited in armorers' shops, obscure secondhand places, seeking a shield. It was well afternoon before he found the place

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he sought, a tiny cubbyhole left when two haughty buildings had not quite met, a mere alleyway between them roofed over by some sad-faced individual with the salesmanship of Jeremiah.

"A shield," he sighed, and sat firm on the broken chair before his door, "I don't think I have many. What kind?"

Daron looked at him sourly. His beard was of the kind that prolonged and persistent laziness, not art, produces, and his hands stained not with the grime of toil but, it seemed to the sea rover, the dust that settles on anything long motionless. "A round shield," said Daron carefully. "A round, flat shield of good steel, or of silver-plated bronze."

"Silver-plated bronze? I had one such—I think it's gone—but they are not practical, I'm told," he added hastily. "A shield of hard-tanned hide will turn an arrow, or stop a blade, and is far lighter. Tharmun's shop, two blocks from here, specializes in them."

"Aye, so?" said Daron patiently. "That's what I learned some five minutes past. Now look you, friend, your aura is that of a wild goat, increased in strength by your advanced age and greater size. The spiders have spun their webs between your feet, and how one so immobile has escaped a load of flowing fat surprises me. Or can it be that your colossal lethargy forbids you rising to seek food?

"Be that as it may, I'll see your shields, my friend, if I must prick your dusted hide to make you seek them in defense. Now *move!*" Daron's sword left its scabbard of its own volition, seemingly, and pricked the cadaverous, sad-faced one.

With a howl of anguish he bounced within his shop, with Daron on his heels.

The sea rover halted. The place was dark as the maw of some deep cave, and rank with lack of cleaning. Very slowly Daron's eyes made out its contents, while the whine of the proprietor sought to convince him he wanted none of the merchandise.

"Be quiet, or by Martal, I'll let that noise out through your throat," snapped Daron. "Now bring me that bronze shield you have. Is it not clear to you that I am mad, and not to be reasoned with?"

The shield was brought. It was bronze, a well-made shield that some craftsman had labored over, and in seeing it, Daron knew that chance had favored him. Unlike any shield he'd seen before, its face was absolutely flat and plain, without decoration save a very chaste and simple geometric pattern that inscribed a circle round the edge. The face was bronze, very thin, for lightness, but by its ring a hard, true melt. The back was crossed with a patterned grid of bars that made it strong enough to turn a broadax swing.

"Now by Martal, chance is behind me this day indeed," said Daron with satisfaction. "What price do you want, Goaty One?"

"Ten *thords* I paid for it, and less than twenty I cannot take and stay in business," the merchant whined.

"Ten *thords* it is then," said Daron, dropping two golden coins, "and good day."

"No, no! Twenty, I said!"

DARON swung on his horse, and started down the street. Behind him he heard a long, sad sigh, and the heavy creak of the broken chair. The shield, he saw, was bronze, plated well with silver, and the price was fair. The silver was black as night with lack of care, and a dark, old bronze patina had coated over the gridwork at the back.

Daron rode back to the watchmaker's shop, and entered in. The old man looked up from where he worked and nodded. "Ten minutes more, son, and your madness will spin as gaily as you like. You are early."

"No," said Daron wearily. "I'm late.

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The old king chuckled. "His logic betters yours, priest!" he roared. "You'll not assassinate this man!"

I needs must polish up my shield."

The old man's sharp eyes turned on the metal shield and narrowed down "Now, by Nazun, I know your wits have left you, or you've more strength than even those none-too-puny arms suggest. That thing may make a fine display—old Elmanus' guards once carried those, I think—but as protection, they're as light and dainty as a good stone wall."

Daron laughed. "I'm vain as the peacock of Ind, and must make a flashing display, father. Give me polish, then, and a bit of cloth, that I may dazzle those who look at me."

The old man bent, and drew out soft rags, and a cake of black-streaked rouge, and some white, moist paste. "Damp the rag at the pump yonder, rub on the rouge and mix the white paste with it. If there's any silver left, that thing should shine."

For half an hour more, Daron rubbed till his back and shoulders ached, and his new-old garments were stained with a dozen shades of red and black and green from the bronze. But when he finished, the old shield's face shone like the sun, with scarce a dozen bad scratches.

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"So it's old Elmanus I've to thank for finding this shield, eh? I knew it was mad to hope to find so useless a thing, but this thing was what I needed, none the less."

"King Elmanus it was. He had a special guard of twenty men, who used those things. Elmanus found that a good spot of sunlight cast back by twenty mirror shields would stop men quicker, and with less stain of blood, than twenty swords. With those twenty shields, the guard could blind a man for half a week.

"Wherefore all Elmanus' enemies came at him after dusk, and found, of course, his twenty guards as well protected by those heavy shields as though they each were weighted down with chains. Elmanus lost three full complements of guards before he gave up those shields.

"You being only one, I'd think you had poor chance to learn wisdom—but that, my son, is your own task. It is your skin that shield is supposed to defend."

"Ah, yes, and so it is. Now tell me, is that thing finished?" Daron asked.

"Done. And here it is. I owe you also a coin, for, having an affection for those who are mad, I made it very light. Undoubtedly, it shows I am a kindred spirit, and mad as you."

"Mm-m-m," said Daron, holding the tiny thing, "it seems good enough indeed. I know good workmanship, and that is here. Keep the extra coin. Good day, father."

"Good day, and if you now seek Nazun's temple, he will cure your madness."

"I have no time. I have another appointment now. Elmanus' guards are seeking me for certain questions involving the death of two priests, and I must find them."

Whistling Daron went out, and the old man looked after him with shrewd, hard eyes. With sudden decision, brought on by overpowering itch of curiosity, the old man swung heavy shutters across his tiny window, barred them, barred the door, and hobbled off across the town. On his weak legs, it would take him some time to reach Elmanus' court.

VIII.

ON THE HIGHEST crest of the rolling land that fronted on the bay, the palace of Elmanus set, overlooking the estates of the nobles down the hills. The avenue here was broad, and paved with bricks of well-baked, hard, red clay. Daron's horse trotted along easily and turned into the broad way that led up to the gate. A half dozen uniformed guards, in bright blue-and-white foppish cut, barred his way with neat precision. Daron stopped at their hail and demand of identity, and looked them up and down.

"Now, lads, for all that foppish rig, you've bone and muscle underneath, I do swear! Now let me—officer, I should say by your stance, and the broadness of your palm, you've walked behind a plow and seen a furrow turn. And a good half of you knows the smell of drying kelp."

"Enough of that!" snapped the officer. "I ask no guesses as to whence we come, but whence you come. In the name of the king, answer, or you'll find time to answer in the keep."

"Now that, my friend, is no threat at all, for there be few places safer in this land that I can think of. Further, your good king would favor seeing me. I understand certain of your brother guards have marched hot streets the whole day through seeking me. Men call me Daron, and my origin is something even I am not too certain of."

"Daron! Ho, forward, *round!*" The guardsmen moved with perfect military precision, and with a smoothness Daron admired. He was instantly the center

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of a small circle hedged with good steel lance points.

"Daron, dismount, in the name of King Elmanus."

"Now softly, friend. What other purpose, think you, brings me here? Take down that hedge, and ease your nervousness. Good. Now, you of the infant mustache, take the horse, and feed him well. I'll want him back. Take sound advice, too. When your friends tell you that is not a mustache, but merely evidence of laziness, believe them. Either shave if off, or dye it dark. On your tanned face, the blond hair seems somewhat weakened, and like drought-burned grain."

The mustached guardsman's face turned red, and his eyes dropped, but he took the horse's reins, his young face sullen. The officer's eyes were lighting with a suppressed amusement and liking.

"Enough, Daron; I give the orders here. But take his horse, Kahlmur—and, by Nazun, his advice! Now, forward. Elmanus has ordered your arrest."

"Your statement, officer—very incourteous officer, too, it seems. I know not your name, though you know mine—is exact. He has ordered my arrest; he does not want to see me."

"Pordan Holum, Daron. Holum, Pordan of the Outer Guards. Maybe his majesty does not desire to see you, but you may rest assured the priests of the Invisible Ones do."

The Inner Guards they passed, and to the doors of King Elmanus' Hall of Justice they were passed. Abruptly, there was an eruption of activity about Daron, and shouting officers. Priests began to appear from a dozen ways, priests in the flaming orange-scarlet of the Invisible Ones, and in the blue-green of Nazun, the deep, sea-green of Talun's temple, and the red-streaked white of Martal's retinue.

A tall, gray-eyed priest of Nazun first approached Daron, where he waited easily among the group of Holum's men. The priest was as tall as Daron, lean and thoughtful of mein, but there seemed some lack of fire in his eyes and face, a worried, tired and strained appearance round his mouth, and a crease between his brows.

"In the name of my lord, Nazun, I appear for you, Daron. The adepts of the Invisible Ones accuse you of murdering two of their neophytes within the streets of Tordu." There was a hasty, uneasy pressure to his words, and a curiously worried, uncertain tone in his voice. And, withal, a look of deep respect with which he regarded Daron. Very softly, so that only Daron himself could hear, he added: "Lord Nazun himself has ordered this appearance—but I fear their case is strong!"

Daron laughed. "I have no knowledge of the laws and rulings of this land, wherein your kindly aid is much to be desired, but none save Nazun himself and, perhaps, the Invisible Ones, knows more of this case than I. I think we may manage, and—if Nazun has given you some charge regarding me, perhaps he gave a charge to follow somewhat as I lead in my argument."

"Aye," said the priest uneasily. "He—Lord Nazun—takes interest in few men."

A PRIEST in scarlet-orange, bedecked with gold and flaming jewels hurried up, a fat, round man waddling busily, with sweat-bedewed pate glistening in the light. "Pordan," he howled, "this man is armed. What manner of arrest is this! Take that shield, that sword and dirk from him. The man is a murderer; would you have an armed killer brought before our king!"

Daron turned to him, and bent a steady, hard-eyed gaze upon his fat, sweaty face. "Now by Nazun, my fat friend, you'll need no murdering. Have not your Formless Ones told you you'll

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die of bursted veins? And would you make a liar out of them by dying before your time?"

The fat-faced priest paled, and panted heavily. "You have no knowledge of that!" he gasped.

"So, I have not. I know nothing of what they say? But yet I do, it seems. Now, be that as it may, remember this. This is the house of King Elmanus, and your orders here are wanted no more than mine; in fact, I think, some several degrees less. I came to this place seeking justice, and of my own free will. Wherefore, my friend, Pordan Holum shows more courtesy than you.

"Now, Pordan Holum," said Daron, turning to the officer, "I give my sword and dirk and shield into your keeping, as an officer of the sea to an officer of the king's guard, to hold and protect with honor, till I may call for them."

"I take them as an officer, to hold and protect," replied Pordan Holum formally—with a gleam of satisfaction directed at the fat priest.

The great oaken doors, bound with mighty hinges of black wrought iron, before which they stood, swung slowly open, and a herald spoke. "In the name of King Elmanus, in the name of Ator, and the people of Azun, the Hall of Justice opens. Bring in those who seek justice before the king."

The crowd surged forward, and it was a growing crowd. A half score of priests in scarlet-orange, and a score in the assorted colors of the Old Gods flanked the little group of Holum's guards that marched with Daron toward the throne.

The room was vast and cool after the heat of outside, the light softened and dimmed. Great slabs of translucent milky quartz made the roof, pouring in the sun's light diluted and cooled. The walls were made of cool, green stone, and the floor was black basalt, soft and soothing to the eye. Great pillars of sea-green stone reached up, carved in intricate and graceful geometric design.

At the far end of the long, high room, sat King Elmanus, on a throne that narrowed Daron's eyes. There was a dais of red granite, and a backdrop of night-blue velvet behind. A ring of guards in that same night-blue velvet faded into it almost unseen, save for the flicker of their unsheathed swords, and their faces. Those faces were tanned and strong, and the men were big, broad-shouldered men with the tapering build of speed and stamina. These were no city breed, but strong countrymen and seamen, every one.

But the throne itself! It was a chair of good blue leather, and deeply padded, without hint of gold or jewel, or any frippery. It was a broad, deep seat, with broad, comfortable arms, and the man that sat in it was broad and comfortable.

Daron's narrowed eyes slanted in a smile. Now here was a king who knew his dignity beyond reproach, and sought the comfort aging bones enjoyed more! Two slim, and pretty girls stood beside, and slightly behind the throne, and Daron's respect increased. They were dressed in simple, easy-falling robes of some light linen stuff, and in the very simplicity of their garments Daron saw more the character of their master.

With neat precision the guards drew up and halted before Elmanus' throne, and behind them stood the fat priest of the Invisible Ones, and the lean and worried priest of Nazun. Directly before Elmanus, Daron halted.

ELMANUS was old, his head crowned with a wealth of white hair that gleamed and shone against the backing of the night-blue velvet drape. He wore a simple jacket of white silk, on which was embroidered in golden threads and scarlet, a crest and coat of arms. And, beneath it, in the oldest language known to man, a brief motto. His breeches were night-blue linen, with gold-thread

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tracery, and in his hand he carried a staff of pure gold, chased with deep-cut formal design. At the peak of the staff there gleamed a single, monster sapphire, as deep as skies, and large as a man's two fists.

Elmanus' face was tired, the dark eyes sunken in old and leathery skin, his mouth creased about with the graven lines of many years of struggle, but over all lay lines of easy humor, and his eyes twinkled with good humor as they looked back into Daron's steady gaze.

"And this is the man you bring me, Tor Lamon, as double murderer? I say with satisfaction, you are a liar or mistaken." Elmanus snorted gently, and nodded to himself. "What is your case?"

The fat priest quivered angrily. "The Invisible Ones, your majesty, have stated that this is the man."

"Well, what say you for yourself . . . er . . . Daron, isn't it?"

Daron shrugged, and smiled. "It is a matter of temperament. These two annoyed me. I was forced to remove them."

Elmanus' jetting brows of white, stiff hairs drew down. "Annoyed you, eh? Are you given to these mad tempers, then?"

"Aye, in case of such annoyance. One sought to spit me on his blade, and the other tried hard with dirk and cloak."

Elmanus snorted and leaned back. "Annoyance enough. What said the Invisible Ones of that, priest?"

"If this man's words be true, then why is it that, not content with killing them, he coldly mutilated their corpses so? One, Rehsal, a neophyte of two years' practice, was run through the throat, and blinded, too. Now if the man be blinded, what need to run him through, and if he be run through, why blind a corpse, save out of coldly murderous temperament?

"And the other was yet more fiendishly mutilated! Shulthas was with us on the Temple Isle seven years, and was a man of good and even temper, yet his body we found run through the throat, blinded, and with the hands cut off.

"This Daron, I say, is a madman, a fiendish maniac. Give him to us, before this voyager from other, barbaric lands destroys more. He must be done away with."

Elmanus looked at Daron with lowered brows. "Your temper seems extreme, for even such provocation. What brought this thing about?"

"The power of the Invisible Ones, your majesty. These things I did; I ran the one attacker through the throat, and he died as any good man should. I turned to face his companion—and the dead man rose and attacked me with a dirk. I blinded him—and he fought me with a skill he had not shown alive! Now such things I do not like, and it seemed the best thing was to make those hands incapable of grasping blade, and only then did that dead thing lie down as a dead man should!"

"Eh?" Elmanus gasped. "The dead fought!"

"The man lies to save his skin! The dead cannot move!" Tor Lamon roared.

Daron turned to the priest, and regarded him through narrowed eyes. "Now tell me this, priest, your gods can predict the future, can they not?"

"As every Azuni knows"

"And you can tell me the exact and final end to each and every power these gods of yours possess?"

"No, for they are gods, and no true god can be envisaged by a man," the priest replied haughtily, looking pointedly at the lean and worried priest of Nazun. "Their powers are unknown, and unknowable."

"Then," said Daron with finality, "they can raise their dead neophytes to fight again. That may be unknown and unknowable to you; I saw them, you did not."

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ELMANUS leaned back, his old eyes brightening.

Tor Lamon sputtered. "The dead cannot rise!" he snapped. "It is preposterous, insane! No—"

"Man," said Daron firmly, "can envisage the powers of a god. So. I saw your Invisible Ones bring the dead to life. Go back to your temples now, and learn more about your gods."

"I think," said Elmanus, with a chuckle in his voice, "his point is very sound. Now on his testimony alone, I would not ordinarily have ruled that he was attacked, but since his arguments are so sound, his logic good enough to meet that of Tor Lamon, who seems sane enough, he must be sane. And if he is sane, he would not make an insane defense. The defense he has presented is insane, or true. If it is not insane, then it is true. We have shown him sane—sane at least as Tor Lamon—and therefore we must accept his statement and defense as true."

Elmanus leaned back with satisfaction in his sparkling old eyes, and watched the empurpling countenance of Tor Lamon. "I dismiss the charge. Daron is free."

"Your majesty," said Tor Lamon with difficulty, "there is a further vital point. I must accept your ruling that this outlander can murder—"

Elmanus' heavy brows shot down, and his finger shot out to stab at the fat priest violently. "I said the charge was dismissed!" he roared, in a voice that blasted at the great room's roof, and set Tor Lamon back in shock. "You deny my ruling by that statement."

"I . . . I retract my words. I . . . I spoke without due thought. But, your majesty, there is a further trouble this outlander brings."

"Speak, then," snapped the old king, his deep eyes sparkling.

"The predictions of the future that our whole country depends upon today—"

"And more fools they," said Daron softly. Elmanus lips twitched.

"—are upset by this outlander. These predictions are based on a knowledge of all things that enter into life upon this empire you rule. Now this outlander has appeared, and injected a new and disturbing element, an element not in the orbits of the peoples of Azun, and upsets the predictions of the longer range."

"Your gods are strong," said Daron softly. "They are mighty, beyond the understanding of man. One man upsets their powers, which is, indeed, beyond the understanding of man, as far beyond his understanding as that a heavy ox cart be upset by a single grain of dust. Strange are the ways of the Invisible Ones."

Tor Lamon purpled with rage. "As much," he ground out, "as the power to predict the future is beyond your comprehension."

"The man's point," said Elmanus mildly, "is well made. It does seem strange." Elmanus relaxed back into his chair with a deep satisfaction. This was, beyond doubt, one of the most excellent examples of priest-baiting he had seen in fifty-five years of weary tending to dry and wordy cases. This Daron was a man to have around!

Tor Lamon's cheeks paled from their fat-bleached dusky red to a cold, white rage. "If a man have two children, and each of these children have but two, and these in turn have no more than two, there will be sixteen then, in the course of one man's lifetime. Now if the man—and his children like him—be an active man, given to killing neighbors who annoy him, at the rate of two in four days, such a family may have profound effect. In fact, it would appear, but some four generations of such men and we would have no more Azuni left in our empire!"

"That sounds somewhat improbable, but still seems a point possible of argu-

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ment," said Elmanus weightily. "Surely you have asked the Invisible Ones when this man shall die?"

Tor Lamon writhed, and Daron, who had studied more than one useful art, spoke softly. "The Invisible Ones could not give him that answer, for their powers are strangely limited, but they could, and did, tell him this; Tor Lamon dies here, this day!"

THE paleness of Tor Lamon's face became ghastly, his lips and eyelids became blued and purpled slowly as he stood, and stark fear shone in his eyes, all rage dying out. "You . . . you cannot know!" he gasped—and screamed as he said it, doubling up and clutching at his heart. He rolled, and fell at Elmanus' feet, dead.

A dozen lesser priests sprang forward, and knelt by the fallen Tor Lamon's side. Slowly they straightened. "Tor Lamon knew that he would die here," they acknowledged.

"How," asked Elmanus uneasily, "did you know this? Are you some newer god still, another god to plague my people here with death?"

Daron shook his head slowly. "There is a vein in the neck, even so fat a neck, and a swelling at the base of his neck, even beyond his fat, and many other small signs that the skilled may learn. I learned those signs. If the man's brain be exposed, there may be found a small but fatal leakage of blood. It may be, though, that the bursting of the great vein of the heart did this. The man was doomed, and being given to anger, doomed him doubly."

"Your majesty," a scarlet-orange robed priest said, "we ask one thing. This man should die; his very presence has, now, three times taken Azuni lives."

"Through defense against attack, twice, and only by the overweening anger of Tor Lamon, the third time. The man lives," said Elmanus decisively.

"Then, in the name of the Invisible Ones, let this man be taken for study to the Temple Isle, that he may be fitted into the pattern, that the knowledge of the future may not be disrupted."

"With the proviso that one month hence, the man be returned to me, healthy, whole, and sane as he is now, that seems a fair request." Elmanus looked at Daron.

"With that proviso," said Daron distastefully, "and the additional one that I be given time to see the sun and breathe the air, I suppose I must agree."

"So be it then," Elmanus nodded. "Take him and all his possesions with him, save his horse, to be returned to him when, one month hence, he returns here before me."

Daron looked slowly at the silent priest of Nazun. The man looked worried, tired, and wearied by his worry. He looked baffled, too, as he looked into Daron's eyes and saw therein a deep total satisfaction!

IX.

DARON stood motionless, weaponless, helmetless, before the scarlet-orange robed high priest of the Invisible Ones. This temple room was small, its walls pure white marble, their decorations a bas-relief of symbolic scenes in the creation of the Invisible Ones. Behind the high priest stood a block of basalt as black as the pit, streaked and grained with flaming scarlet-orange veins in lightning darts of brilliant color.

There was no other thing in the room, and light that entered came through plates of pure white marble shaved thin as heavy paper, diffused and softened, shadowless. But above that altar there remained a feel of vast and angry tension, a straining, malignant drive that sought to reach and tear at the mind of the sea rover standing between four heavy-thewed and brawny priest guards.

Priests those four might be, but by the ripple of their scarlet-orange cloaks

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across their broad and heavy shoulders, their training had come in larger degree from the hilt of a sword and the grip of a shield than from the pages of a book. They gripped their silvery needle swords now with an easy sureness that spoke conclusively of confidence in handling them.

But confidence was gone now from the face of the high priest; his brows were contracted in a frown of futile anger, his eyes blazing with rage, and his lips, strangely tense with fear and lack of surety.

"Who are you, outlander? Was that aged fool, Elmanus, right in naming you some new and potent god, a god both material and of force, too? The Invisible Ones shy off from you, cannot reach and touch your brain. Speak, what are you—man or god?"

A slow, easy smile of complete and easy satisfaction touched Daron's lips. "Now that, friend priest, it seems to me, is the purpose for my being here; you seek to find that answer. Sure it seems, Elmanus gave you thirty days to learn, and me no orders to inform you.

"This I will say: you'll know before the thirty days are gone—but not from my lips." Daron's smile changed to a solemn frown of thought. "But hold. You and your priests have maintained that no true god can appear as a man. A god, you say, by very definition is nonhuman, beyond conception of a human mind. Now that is a point I would not agree upon, but your own definition shows you, it would seem, that I must be a man, and no god."

"Why do you dispute that definition?" snapped the priest. "It is clear that a man-thing is no god, for, by very definition, a god is superhuman."

Daron laughed. "True enough, and sound logic that may be. But you have lost, here, it seems, the principles of logic. Have you heard, perhaps, of the 'undistributed middle'? Look you, a fish swims in the sea."

"Aye."

"I swam in the sea. Therefore I am a fish."

"And of what importance is your false and silly sophistry?"

"A god is more than man," said Daron pointedly.

"By definition, that is so."

"And more than man's conception can hold. Wherefore you limit his powers stringently in one thing; whatever he may be, it must be unfamiliar, he cannot appear a man. So—and, swimming in the sea, I am a fish."

The high priest cursed softly to himself, and glared at Daron's mocking eyes, and cursed again at old—but potent!—King Elmanus.

"Your mind is a maze of silly, tricking traps and nonsense thoughts. The Invisible Ones appear in any form they choose; watch now the altar top, watch closely, see the darkening there—the slow darkening and condensation—see it grow, grow darker, more solid, a vague cloud at first—solidifying, strengthening—forming to no normal man, but a winged being of luminosity—a glowing, slowing forming thing—"

Daron smiled and nodded to himself, and stole a sideward glance at the four priest guards that stood beside him. Awe and fear were growing on their faces, and in Daron's mind a dry old voice repeated an old refrain in the liquid, fluent syllables of the Ind: "No mind but yours can rule your thoughts, no mind but yours can control your inner self. But your mind will, if you permit it, follow after any other mind, and see and feel and be as that other mind desires—if you will let it! I can make you see the flower or the tiger, smell the perfume or the acrid breath, but it is your mind, not mine, that does that thing."

And Daron looked at the empty altar and smiled at the futile mouthings of the

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fat and sweating priest. His hands moved and waved in futile gropings, and Daron let his mind laugh at the futility and pay no heed at all to all the high priest's exhortations.

"Your men," said Daron softly, "see wondrous things. I see an empty altar. Cease your foolish mouthings, and get on with what you seek to do."

The high priest's eyes blazed in exasperation, and he collapsed from mighty dignity like a pricked bladder of air. "Wake!" he snapped fretfully. "You see no more."

Four priest guards started, their eyes blinked rapidly, and their mouths gawped foolishly at empty air. With the white calm of incandescent fury, the high priest spoke again. "Take this accursed outlander to the South Wing of cells, and keep him there. I'll search him later."

Angrily the high priest turned away, and vanished through a door that seemed a part of the marble wall. Daron turned to the awed guards, and looked at them through lowered lids, a broad grin splitting his face. "Remarkable! These Invisible Ones are invisible indeed. You seemed to see something there?"

"Quiet!" snapped the leader of the four. "March, and step along."

Daron followed easily, his mind busy with his thoughts. For one thing old Barhamu had said was true: no mind but his could touch his inner self. And one thing he had said was not true of these Azuni—they could trick the minds of many men, a mass of worshipers!

DOWN from the upper marble levels of the temple they went, and through corridors hollowed out in black basalt that formed the foundations of the isle, then across half the width of the isle it seemed, to rise again into a building of gray, hard granite, and huge oaken, iron-bound doors. A guard in dull-blue cloak and well-worn leather turned a huge iron lock, and passed them through, accompanying them, to use his key again upon another door.

The passageway before them now—walled and floored and ceiled with hard gray stone—was lined with heavy doors, iron bound and locked. It was a narrow passage, so that but two men could walk abreast, and at the far end an open door gave into a guard room where four blue-caped and well-weaponed guards lounged at their ease, to straighten into interest as the men came up the hall.

"In the name of the high priest, Shor Lang, we bring this prisoner. By King Elmanus' given order, one month he stays, to be guarded, fed and kept in health. And these are the orders of Shor Lang," said the scarlet-orange garbed leader of the priest guards formally.

One of the blue-caped prison guards, his head covered by a good steel helmet, worn at a jaunty, carefree angle, nodded, grunted, and tossed a heavy iron key to the priest guard. "Number three, down the way. If he's the howling menace to peace of mind that stinking fisherman we just threw out of there has been, you can have him back and welcome."

Daron's swift eyes took in the room. Two benches, two chairs, all hard and made of slabbed wood. One table, with a good and comfortable chair. A paneled case on one wall filled with bound volumes with a thousand titles—all religious. The table was littered with a dozen stacks of a dozen different forms, ink and pens, and odds and ends. As Daron turned away, the captain of the guards was filling in one of the forms.

"Where's his equipment, or does he walk the streets as naked of blade as he is now?" he asked.

"His materials will be brought to you for storing in the locker room. Elmanus ordered all returned to him one month hence. A shield—and it's one of those mirror things old Elmanus finally got sense to dispense with—a sword, a dirk,

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and a helmet of gold and silver wire and phony jewels."

"Wire?" The captain of the guards looked up, then looked toward Daron's retreating back. "A fool. If he had gold and silver, he could get good steel and leather. I'll hold this form till the things arrive. Here's receipt for your man. Hm-m-m, he rolls like a seaman, but his garb stinks of earth."

Daron stepped through the oaken door to his cell. The walls were hard, gray granite, too tough it seemed for even prisoners' patient scratching of names and decorations. One cot, one chair of hard oak slabs, and little furnishing else. The door came to behind him with a *thunk* of very sound and solid oak, and the lock turned with an oily grate of heavy steel.

Daron paced the room with eyes keen in observation. The door was no flimsy thing, but it was pierced by a spy-hole with a little sliding plate that let the guards look in whenever they might think of it, but left the prisoner blind as to passings in the corridor.

A window, high on the other side of the tiny cell, was barred with inch-thick wrought iron, blackened by weather, but resistant to rust. They were let into a granite block of size and strength that echoed clearly: "No—not this way, my friend."

Daron lay down to pass the time and think a bit. A month he had to plan his way—which should be time enough. An hour after he came, a guard came down on feet so soft they made no noise through thick oak panels. Only the sudden *clank* of the sliding spy-hole plate appraised Daron of his coming, and the gleam of a weirdly unsupported eye. Daron grunted. With that sudden sort of inspection, there'd be no safe working out of tools within this room.

Restlessly, he went over to the spy-hole again. Six close-spaced bars of metal stopped it from the inner side. Bronze, though, and Daron eyed them speculatively. Daron carried a dirk-blade without handle beneath his clothes, a handy thing he'd found.

The light died out of the high window, and the cell was dark. Daron slept.

WITH morning, the door was opened by two guardsmen, accompanying a single small and worried man in a greasy apron. The small and worried man edged nervously into Daron's room, and offered him a tray of wood, bearing two bowls of food.

The sea rover laughed. "My friend, I eat men only when most direly hungry. Keep me well fed, and your bones are safe enough."

The little, gray-haired man's lips pulled aside in a mechanical and nervous smile. "Yes. Yes, yes; oh yes. Food. Yes, sir. I—"

Daron looked at the grinning guards. "Has some one been frowning at him?"

"There's a fisherman with hair and strength enough to be old Talun himself down the way, and this goat-eared thing that calls itself a cook has been underfeeding him. Drathun, our fishing friend, swears he'll eat him yet," said one of the guards.

"Why, if I know seamen and their ways, there'd be peace and safety for him if he'd feed him," Daron commenced.

"Eat up yourself, and get ready," said the guard, as the little man danced nervously through the closing door. "Old Elmanus, so they tell me, ordered exercise and air. And Shor Lang says the gardens. So . . . so you'll learn some gardening in an hour more."

An hour later, the little man was back to pick up the empty bowls. The food was bad enough, but fairly plentiful, so Daron felt easy as he strolled out to the passageway. Six guards were there now, and the captain of them was going down the hall, opening the great cell doors one at a time, with a huge

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brass key. A dozen assorted prisoners came out, some seamen, browned and smelling of dried kelp and fish scales, some farming men, with brown-stained hands, and shambling, easy walk, and one man with the mold of lumbering.

Daron watched the process keenly. The corridor was lined up all one side with cells, and heavy doors that opened outward into the passage. Two cells opened from the other wall. At one end of the passage—the end but two doors from his own cell—there was a heavy oaken door that let out to the main buildings. At the opposite end was the guardroom's ever-watchful doors.

As Daron stepped out into the corridor the men from the cells nearest that outer door were already waiting. One, a massive, squat chunk of a man with bearlike arms and legs, and bearlike forward-slanting neck, looked up at him from deep-sunken eyes beneath enormous, bushy eyebrows, black as charcoal marks. His body, through torn and salt-stained jacket and breeches, was as hairy as an animal's.

But the little, far-sunk eyes were twinkling with good humor, and the mouth was wide and strong, the creases round its corners slanting upward.

"So," he said, in a gentle rumble, like a starting avalanche, "this be the outlander then? I'm Drathun, fisherman because no other of the scum of Nozos have the guts to sail beyond a dog's bark or a birdie's peep. What are these other lands? As big as Azun, then?"

"Nozos?" said Daron. "Hm-m-m, that's on the Isle of Eran, is it not? Ah yes. As to the outer world. There's more sea than land, man, but there's far more land than ever you've seen. What brings you here?"

"Catching fishes in the isle's shadow!" he boomed in laughter. "They feared their pretty barges would smell of good, clean food."

"So they teach you now the beauty of the little pansy and the delicacy of the rose's sweet perfume? A new trade for you, then?"

"Gardening!" Drathun snorted. "And two more months of that. Solmun, my helper—aye, the lad with midget mustache on his lips—goes free in another week."

"Quiet," roared the guard captain. "Now, *march!*"

He led them to the door, worked at the lock with his great key, and the little troop was led outside, down an angling corridor to stop before another oaken door. Three guards remained with them, and three stepped through the door as the captain unlocked it with his key. Racked tools occupied one wall, and on the other, Daron's sharpening eyes saw a miscellany of possessions. Nets and clubs and hats and—a silver-plated bronze shield, a long, strong sword, a jewel-hilted dirk, and a familiar helmet of gold and silver wires and curious jewels.

A heavy mattock in his hands, Daron followed quietly to the gardens outside. A tangled mass of weeds and tough-rooted creepers sprang from an uneven plot of newly imported soil that lay upon the barren basalt rock. Two lanky farming lads, one crossbow-armed guard, Daron and Drathun, the chunky fisherman were set to work.

The sun was hot, the air was still, and the roots were tough. The position of work was one Daron was not accustomed to, and his muscles ached before the day was done. He slept that night with the heavy, solid sleep of exhaustion. And—of contentment. He had a month.

X.

DARON sat down, with his back to a tree, and the heavy, rich odor of new-turned, sun-baked earth in his nostrils. Only faintly the salt, clear scent of the

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sea swept in, and he looked with sour eyes at the glint of sun on wind-ruffled waters.

"Drathun, my friend," he sighed at last, "that, and not this stubborn land, is the place for men. Now a plant belongs in soil, rooted and fixed, unchanging itself in a never-changing stuff. But for a man to grow—and growth is change—he needs must live where change is constant. On the sea."

"Aye—and a month, a week, and two more days before I get back to it." Drathun's deep-buried, twinkling eyes looked saddened. "To turn this filthy dirt, and sit penned in a room, and never smell the sea from week's end to week's end. *Ugh.*"

"I think," said Daron softly, looking up through the tracery of an ornamental tree, "that we might leave these people here without their full consent. *If* you don't roar it out like a captain calling the bow-watch in a storm."

"Eh?" said Drathun sharply, in a much reduced bellow. His powerful, blocky body tensed.

"Do you," asked Daron, "like our aid

"Move, fool! Somewhere in your mass of junk you'll have it," Daron snapped. "A shield—a bronze shield with mirror surface—"

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and helper there, Tarmun, the farmer?"

"He's a solid ox, but good enough."

"Tarmun!" called Daron, turning toward the farmer lolling under a hedge, a floppy hat of woven straw laid across his face.

The gangling farmer raised his head, and the hat fell away. His face was long and sad and brown, and the man himself was long and sad and brown—and only Daron had the strength of arm the slow-moving farmer showed.

"This shade is cooler here—and our brief hour of rest draws to a close. Come nearer, friend. I want to know that triply distilled essence of vegetable evil the next time I pull its root. That—what is the name?"

"Snake-bite root," the farmer roused himself gradually, stretched, and ambled over. "You can tell it," he sighed lugubriously, "by the purple veining of the root, and"—his voice fell as he sat near them, and farther from the guard still munching on his lunch in the shade of another tree—"you're a liar, my friend. You know it well after one bite, being above the wit of a hog, which learns likewise, in one good sting. What do you seamen want of me?"

"You like it here, perhaps, in the Temple of the Invisible Ones, my friend?"

"I loathe their rotten ways as heartily as you men of Talun do, as you well know." His hamlike hand raked up a dozen stems of a sweet-flavored grass, and he chewed on them moodily.

"Then, my strong-armed friend," said Daron easily, staring up through the tree to the free blue sky, "do me the favor of tying this lumpy one in a goodly running bowline as the guard puts us in the cells this night. You know perhaps an insult or two to sting a seaman's hide?"

"Oh, the seaman's good enough in his place, but the place has too much smell. That stinking merchandise that Drathun would have us think is food, makes right good nourishment for plants, when well rotted at their roots."

Drathun's deep-sunk eyes grew somewhat brighter, and his wide, friendly mouth grew harder. "My oxlike, friend, you learn your wit and knowledge from the horses you nurse about your farm. I'll knot those hawser-things that you call arms with greatest joy tonight."

"Aye, so?" said Tarmun sadly. "But then, Daron perhaps knows better why and when and where this thing should find its working out."

"In the passage before our cells, when all but we have been locked away. Drathun, your cell is nearest to the door, on that same side on which my cell is placed. Tarmun, your cell is across from my own. The cell on your side nearest to the outer way is unoccupied. We three will be last to be put away. If you would fight—"

"Aye," said Drathun. "We will, but, friend—" His brows drew down in puzzled wonder, and his tiny, deep-set eyes looked up at Daron from under paint-brush brows.

A guard stood up, stretched leisurely, and roared a call to work. The three beneath the tree moved apart reluctantly, Daron's voice rising slowly in "—know the accursed rope next time I spot it, and, my friend, I'll fry it slow and happily."

Tarmun yawned. "Do that, seaman, and you'll learn that plants have better protection than your brainless fish. Fry it, and the vapors will give you such an itch on all your body as you've never known, nor ever will forget. Drop that—it's mine. It's lighter."

"Yours, you mud-footed farmer, that tool is mine!" roared Drathun, grabbing at the mattock angrily, well knowing it was his, and that Tarmun knew it, too.

"Let loose, fish-skin. You'll never swing a mattock like a man, and that will bring more aches than results, with your soft-muscled flesh."

"Why, you horse-faced flounder of the land! Let go that hold, before I try

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the mattock blade in that dried clay you call a head! I'll—"

"You," said a bored guard, "will drop that thing, seaman. If your friend, the ox, wants to play with it, why let him. Sure it fits his hand better than yours, but I'll try a rope's end on your back if your prefer to argue."

Growling, Drathun picked up another mattock, and swung to his work, his brow-hidden eyes darting at the shambling, long-armed farmer.

FROM a dozen ornamental trees about the gardens, Daron collected bits of exuding gum, and chewed them placidly, to damp his work-dried mouth. The guards sat comfortable in the shade, and joked at the laboring men, and kept the water bottles handy.

Twice through the long, hot afternoon the stubby, bearlike seaman and the horse-faced farmer came near blows, and twice the bored guard captain stopped their angry voices. With sunset, the dozen men were gathered together, and marched back to their cells, placed before their doors, and one by one locked in.

The captain locked away the fourth from last, and turned to Daron. In a slow, drawling voice the lanky farmer spoke. "Was it," he asked of Drathun gently, "your mother or your father that was the bear? For surely you cannot be full human with such a pelt as that. You should use a currycomb more frequently, and comb the stink of fish from it."

From the gray granite floor, Drathun swung a calloused fist toward the farmer's heavy jaw. With the slightest, slowest movement possible, Tarmun moved aside. His long arm reached out, grabbed Drathun's fist, and in an instant the two were rolling, struggling on the floor.

The captain of the guard looked down with exasperated boredom.

Daron roared in laughter. "Ho guard, give me that key! They've been wanting to fight this out all day; we'll let 'em try it for a night."

Grinning, the captain released the key, and Daron, with a mighty heave of his foot, sent both the struggling pair into the vacant cell, and locked the door on them, to toss the key to the captain. He stared through the peephole slot, till the guard captain shoved him aside.

"Now my fine buckoes, you two can fight the whole night through," said the captain sourly, "if such be your mind, or you can learn the part of men and stand up here. Your supper will be in your cell, but by the Invisible Ones, there'll be no scrap or bite of food in that place you've got now."

Sullenly, the two men rose, eying each other angrily. Equally sullenly, they came out, to be locked in their separate cells, as Daron stepped into his. In Daron's closed palm, however, was an impression on the gums he'd gathered of that master key that turned all locks in this whole wing!

And in Daron's mind—lest the Invisible Ones be seeking to read his thoughts and plans—was a turmoil that defied their every effort. And that, too, was thanks to the old wizard of the Ind. Daron was trying to remember places, people, and happenings he had forgotten, and, since most forgetting is because there is a subconscious barrier to remembrance, both conscious and subconscious minds were in a fine fog to any probing mind.

Under the tree, the next noon hour, Daron and Drathun sat, and, at long and patient calling, Tarmun at last came over, mollified. He sank down beside Daron, well away from Drathun, the half-amused, half-bored guard captain watching Daron's laughing eyes as he smoothed their anger down.

"And now, since Drathun plays with closed fists, I have an eye two shades darker than the other," sighed Tarmun, "and no good reason for it. I like the man—and he's as slippery as one of his

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own eels. What, pray, was the reason for this?"

"An impression in a bit of gum. I've a design of that magic bit of metal called a key our guard captain conjures our doors open with. Within another pair of nights, I *could* carve out a key to do the same—but for that thrice-accursed peephole in my door. But—I've a mind to block it up."

"The guard," said Tarmun sourly, "will approve of that."

"He will," laughed Daron, "when he sees my block! Now Drathun; you say your assistant was held less blameworthy, less punished for the crime of fishing in the bay?"

"Aye. The Invisible Ones are touchy on the score since old Talun sent droves of dying fish to pollute the bay, and drive the noble pretties on their way."

"He goes in two days, I think?"

"Aye."

"Now if I were a fisherman released from this place, I'd go to Talun's good temple on Mt. Kalun, and give thanks to him. And, if I were released at such a time as this, I'd tell the priests of Talun that the fishing fleets might well be here—following a heavy run, perhaps—when next the moon is dark. Say five days hence."

"Aye, would you now? Daron, you seem to me a man of sense; I'll tell the boy your good advice." Drathun's deep eyes looked uneasily at Daron's immobile, placid face. "A run of fish, the whole fleet would follow willingly—if Talun would grant such things at any man's request."

"And, were I released, a seaman, now, after seeing Talun's temple, I'd seek the fishing fleet, and tell them of my strong dislike for this prettied isle, and this misused harbor that has beribboned barges, rowed by gold-and-ribbon-decked girls. I'd even try to urge them to sail in here in force."

"Their reluctance would not be overwhelming—if they saw a reason there," remarked Drathun.

"Now," said Daron, "if such things had been suggested to you, as a fisherman, and it had been mentioned that, if Talun approved, a run of fish would come—would you follow such a run, and enter the harbor?"

"And every man of Nozos, and every other fishing port as well!" Drathun answered.

"And," said Tarmun lazily, "you might mention that idea to a farmer here and there. Who be ye, Daron? Man or god?"

"There'll be small loss, however it may fall, if no run of fish appears to tell of Talun's approval," said Daron with finality.

"None," agreed Drathun, stretching mightily, and standing up. He wandered off to settle heavily beside his young assistant, a hundred yards away.

Daron was wandering about, picking up some bits of wood and twigs. Presently the guard called them to work again.

THE captain of the guard walked down the row of cell doors on soft feet, mechanically slipping open the peepholes of the doors to glance at the men within. He came to No. 3, leaned toward the peephole and slipped the plate aside—and jumped back with a howl of dismay.

Abruptly from within came a roar of echoing laughter, and the captain of the guard looked again, heard the running feet of the guardsmen down the corridor, and cursed luridly.

"By the Invisible Ones!" he roared, "that triply-damned slot nipped out a piece of my thumb as neatly as you please. Go on back, ye fools. I'll fix the thing."

Angrily he unlocked the door and swung it open as his men came back. He stepped inside the door, and pulled it halfway shut behind him. On the cot, doubled up in the light of his lamp,

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Daron was laughing soundlessly now.

He wiped his eyes, and looked up at the furious face of the captain of the guard. "By the gods, captain, do me this small turn; leave up the thing, and let your men bite as hard as you! So it nipped your thumb, eh?"

The captain glared at him. "Nipped my thumb? Blazes, no, as you well know, fish-skinner! It stuck its leering face out into mine when I slid that peephole cover aside, and I liked to jump out of my sandals with the startlement."

Daron laughed silently, and through his laughter managed: "My respects, captain! Ye've a mind that works fast. The nipped thumb was a pretty alibi!"

The captain snorted softly and turned toward the door and its peephole. "And have my men make me a laughingstock for crying 'Guard! Guard!' for fright at a silly jack-in-the-box—though, by the god's, a more obscene face my eyes have never laid on before! What is the cursed thing?"

One of the light bronze bars had been twisted from the peephole grate to make room for the contraption of paper, twigs and strings. A knotty root supplied an evil, tiny face with hideous, wormy beard, held on a springy twig that had been compressed behind the peephole plate to thrust the startling obscenity of the twisted root in the captain's face when the plate was moved. A bit of luridly red paper supplied a body of snakelike form, a wholly startling thing to burst forth from the door.

"A root!" the captain grated in disgust.

"A root!" said Daron, shaken with laughter. "Let not this art be sacrificed with but one showing, friend!"

In silent anger at his own stupidity, the captain closed the door, and slipped the peephole shutter back. Beyond the door, he could hear the scratchings as Daron fitted up his contraption again.

He walked on his rounds, and so did not hear the further scratchings as Daron carved, from the removed bronze rod, a duplicate of the captain's key that had been hidden against his belly when the captain opened the door.

An hour later, there was another howl of terror, a moment's silence, and a lurid cursing of a nipping slide. Daron, in silent laughter, stared out the hole into the red and foolish face of the guard. In determined silence the guard replaced the trap, and Daron returned to his carving. Slow work, for even good hard steel does not make fast progress on well-tempered bronze. But the key was shaping.

XI.

"MAYAN'S a fool—he never brought in more than a thousand pounds of fish at once in his life—but he's agreed to do it tonight. And Tarmun will be ready," Drathun whispered as he passed Daron. The guard snapped something at him, and he turned into the cell.

Thirty seconds later, Daron was locked in his cell, and within an hour, the last meal of the day was gone, and the little timid man had collected the bowls of their food.

Then: "Guard! Ho, guard!" Tarmun was roaring.

The guardsman walked down the corridor lazily. "Aye, what is it?"

"The captain gave me permission to wash the earth from my jacket this evening. Let me down to the washroom."

"Captain, Tarmun, the farmer, wants to wash his jacket down the passage."

"Let him go," called the captain boredly, "but keep an eye on him."

Daron heard the click and scrape of the heavy key in Tarmun's lock, then the heavy tread of the farmer, passing by his door.

"Hey, guard!"

"Aye, what now?"

"I be going mad of sitting here in one small room. In the name of the gods, will you let me get something to read, at least?"

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"Captain! Mayan, the fisherman, wants something to read. Shall I send him down."

"Now by the Invisible Ones! I didn't think the fool had brains enough! Aye, send him down the hall, and if he must read, he'll read of the true gods."

Again the great bronze key scraped in a lock, and the heavy hinges creaked as the door was forced open. Mayan's rolling steps echoed down the stone-walled hall.

Mayan's cell was but one door beyond Daron's, and on Daron's side of the corridor. Tarmun's cell was directly across the corridor. With the two men out of their cells, one walking by the guard down to the washroom, the other bound down the long hall to the guardroom—

With a single flowing motion, Daron was up and at his door. The five remaining bronze bars behind the peephole clinked in Daron's hand, and, noiselessly, the peephole plate slid back. Through the hole, Daron saw what he had prayed for. With both men out of their cells, their great oak doors stood open—*open into the narrow passageway from opposite sides, completely cutting off the view from the guardroom!* And the guard was watching Tarmun wash his jacket.

Daron's long arm snaked out through the peephole, reached down, and thrust the key he'd carved into the lock of the door. It scraped, stuck a bit, turned—and the door opened. Instantly, Daron's arm was back, the five bronze bars were refixed in the peephole, and the contraption of roots and paper blocked the hole again.

Daron swung through the door, and as the door closed soundlessly behind him, he stiffened in horror.

"Ho!" came the roar of Tarmun's great voice down the passageway. Daron had the door half open again, and was darting through as the voice roared on.

"—on a fair spring day,
"When the snow's away,
"We'll plant the seed and pull the weed,
"And wait the harvest's sway-ay—"

Daron cursed weakly, and stepped out the door again. The lock clicked to behind him, and the key was in his hand again. Two steps, two motions, and Drathun's door swung open, and the squat, powerful seaman moved soundlessly out. Two steps more, the door was shut and locked behind him, and the outer door swung open. Instantly Drathun was through, then Daron, and that door, too, was locked tight behind.

"Left," whispered Daron, and the two were off on soundless, shoeless feet—each, at Daron's strict order, thinking furiously of things they could not remember! Left, and down, and across a deserted corridor, and the key slipped in another iron-bound oaken door. The unoiled hinge creaked softly, and Daron cursed beneath his breath, then they were in.

FROM beneath his jacket, Drathun pulled a stub of candle, lit it, and the door was closed behind them. In the light of the candle's glow, the locker room was ghostly with hunched things, unnamable and unrecognizable. Two tense-nerved men danced lightly on their feet as each made his way to his own things.

Ten seconds later, Daron was out, and Drathun close behind. On Daron's head sat now the gold-and-silver wired cap of Nazun, and in his hand he carried his own good sword. Drathun, behind him, had a helmet of good round steel he'd looted from some temple guard, and bore a sword like a good ship's spar for length and mass.

Daron's mind went blank for just an instant's time, as he sent a frantic prayer to Nazun for guidance—then something smashed into his mind, and exploded in his brain. In the instant it came, it died

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—but left its trace on Daron's mind.

"Remember forgotten things," Daron whispered to Drathun, and the squat seaman nodded, his deep-set eyes blank with thought. Daron took his arm, and jerked him to motion down a side corridor.

In that instant's flash of understanding, a map of the entire Temple Isle had been engraved upon his mind—and the room of the sphere he knew! On fleeing, soundless feet he set out, with Drathun's shorter legs rolling fast and noiseless behind. Down long gray corridors of granite he went, then down a stair that led to black basalt corridors.

The candle flickered in the lightless dark, and shadows writhed behind them and before. There was an odor of musty dark, and the faintly sour smell of seawashed rock about them. Through long, long tunnels they fled, till they were far beneath the main temple of marble.

"There's something pricking at my mind," Drathun whispered.

As he spoke, Daron felt the first strange tingling of the cap he wore, and a soft, dim glow of bluish lights like the lights of the winter sky in the far north, played round his head. Simultaneously, Daron was turning off and down, along a horizontal corridor of black basaltic rock, then down a stair. Another corridor branched off, turned, and descended once more. But now the black basalt of the isle was not fine enough. This run was lined with white marble blocks.

The candle was out, and far ahead Daron heard the stir of men, and excited voices. A light sprang into being ahead, and the two dropped aside in a branching corridor to wait.

A pair of scarlet-orange cloaked priestly guards ran by, their voices tense and angry, bearing a crystal lamp. Behind them another pair appeared. Then the lights were all upon the way the seamen had come. They started on, had made a hundred yards, when from a black tunnel mouth two guards sprang out with roaring cries that mouthed and mumbled down the bore, and lost all semblance of voices to become vague animal cries.

"Their hands!" snapped Daron, "Take off their hands—or these things will not die!"

Drathun snorted, and his broad mouth opened in a grin. The great sword he bore he twirled like a staff of wheat, his great, thick wrists untiring in its lightning glimmer. It struck the priest-guard's lighter weapon, twisted, flung the thing aside to clatter on the floor—and drank at the man's heart. The figure in scarlet-orange slumped, fell forward, and measured its length on the floor. Drathun turned to find Daron engaged with a left-handed opponent now—and gasped as the man he'd killed stabbed up at him from the floor, dead eyes white and ghastly in the light of the lamp the priests had carried.

"They can't die!" the fisherman gasped, his blade slowed by his very fear of this unholy thing.

"No, fool—their hands, take off the hands, and dead or alive, they can't grip blades!"

TWO MINUTES lost, two handless corpses behind, they pressed down the corridor. The men they dodged were ranging back now, their shouts and cries an echoing confusion down the corridors. Daron ran on, eyes grim and determined, Drathun beside him sweating cold with horror. This thing was new to him, and none too old to Daron yet.

"Two turns more, Drathun, and we reach the room. Look not within, or you fall paralyzed. Believe me there, as you did not believe what I said of those undead guards. I'll go within; you guard my back, and look not in the room until I call. Hear?"

"Aye. I'll wait outside."

They turned a corner—turned an-

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The roaring mob swept Daron to their shoulders, and, half regretfully, Daron looked up the hill toward Lady Tammar's temple—still unattained!

other, and met a dozen guards, looking this way and that to locate the source of echoing calls that resounded endlessly in the halls. The two were in their midst and through them to the doorway before they well knew they'd come.

And at that doorway, a sheet of livid lightning struck, struck—and held! Blue curling flame, that writhed and danced and shrieked! A scarlet-orange guard backed away in leaping panic of the thing at his back, and Daron tripped him with a flying foot. The man stumbled, twisted, shrieked as he touched the wall of flame.

Then he fell through, but was not consumed. Instead, he wavered slowly to his feet, as guards and attackers stopped alike in fascination. The man stood up, and his face was blank, his lips lax, his arms helpless, flabby things that swung at his sides. He laughed

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and chuckled, and the chilling sound rattled loosely in the corridor. He laughed, and the laughter grew in Gargantuan reboundings, thrusting fingers of madness in their brains.

Then the soldier-priest was dancing, dancing, skipping down the hall, and the men drew back and let him pass.

Daron stiffened, and his face went white and tense. "Nazun!" he called—and leaped toward that sheet of waving flame.

He touched it, and the helmet on his head grew warm while icy pricklings tore at his scalp. A shrieking hell of warring forces danced and sang and shattered in crystalline trumpetings about him, his body ran in crimson flame, blue laced, and wrapped in the blue lightnings of the Invisible Ones, a sheath of flickerings that blinded.

Warring things struggled there, with low mumblings of sound and silent fury that underran the root of their blasting. Then slowly, from the very peek, where the dead, black stone of Barak, Lord of Fate reposed, a veil of black welled out, a heavy, clinging smoke of night that rippled, spread out, and overran, tumbling down about the figure that stood paralyzed, a helpless point on which two unseen forces concentrated.

The black lapped out, and drank the blue curtain of flame, drank and pulled and grew, and the howling hell of lightning died down, weakened, till only the mad, maddening mutterings remained, and even they grew weak. The icy pricklings left his scalp; the crimson cocoon of fire withdrew—

Abruptly he was through the doorway, and in the same instant that the cloaking cloud of blackness vanished, Daron pulled the little mechanism made for him, from a hidden pocket, and clamped it in his eyes, a monocle of mechanism. He touched a button, and it whirred, softly, swiftly. Behind him he heard the roar of fear-struck guards coming again to life and action, and the clang of Drathun's mighty sword. Before him, in the same instant, he saw the circle of guards.

A dozen picked fighting men, men in cloaks of pure white wool, with harness of creamy leather, studded heavily with silver fittings leaping toward him who faced at last the three-foot globe that was the root and being of the Invisible Ones!

There was fear and stark amazement on the faces of the guards, a fear and unknowingness that hampered at their minds, and slowed their movement. This huge and bearded warrior who stood before them, with one blue eye closed, and a monocle of whirring mechanism mounted in his other eye, this—man or god—who passed the veil of madness!

Daron's silver shield swept up, and every warrior of them looked to it, as any trained and instant-reaction warrior must—

And every man of them slowed, stiffened—and became a rigid, useless thing, eyes fixed and glazed, staring at the image of the thing of mystery that every one had kept always his back toward! In the polished, perfect mirror of the shield, they stared into the mystery of the whirling, circling, patterned lights, the lights that boiled and raved and twisted now, as though some maddening thing was driving, hurrying, forcing them on.

Daron moved forward, two slow steps. His heavy blade came up—and fell.

A HIGH, clear and piercing note sang out, a sweet, cloying sound of exquisite tone, as from a mighty, perfect bell. Again the heavy blade came up, and fell. Louder rang the note—but perfect still.

The silver shield moved, streaked forward, and clanged in brazen wrath—and the silver sphere exploded in a mighty blast of light, a shrieking, howling tor-

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nado of more-than-sound, a light that seared and darkened eyes.

The sphere was gone.

Daron snatched the whirring mechanism from his eye, opened his closed eye—and had by that one eye the advantage of every other. The twelve white-cloaked guards were down, down in limp and broken postures that told the warrior's eye a tale of ultimate defeat.

These men were corpses—and had been!

The power that animated them—the Invisible Ones—was gone!

Daron turned. Drathun was standing, half leaning against the doorway, holding a streaming wound in his left arm. "They fled when that bubble burst—and all shrieking furies of the world fled by me, too! By Talun and Martal, man, what deadly stuff is this we battered into?"

"That was the death-howl of the Invisible Ones, my friend," said Daron grimly. "Now we've a rendezvous above, I think."

"The fishermen's ships!" Drathun gasped. "The Invisible Ones are gone!"

"Come up—they'll need guidance, they'll need to know!"

Along the winding passages they ran, passages that seemed like veins of some dead animal now, drawn of all life, dead things that had been living. The guards were fled, they saw no men, but far away they heard the howling, shouting clamor of men in terror and in pursuit.

They vomited from a sloping ramp, and stood in a garden torn and trampled now, a score of corpses fallen on the grass. Strange corpses, dead and useless things—with no mark to show their death! Fallen, Daron knew, in the instant that the crystal shell that was the root and basis of the Invisible Ones was shattered.

Daron charged across the gardens toward the main entrance to the vast, snowy temple of the Invisible Ones. A line of blue-cloaked guards was fighting, holding back a horde of howling, rough-clad seamen. And at their very head, roaring in a voice of thunder, stood a rough and hairy figure, a very squat giant of a man—

"Talun!" roared Daron, and charged forward. "By Talun and the Old Gods all, they're gone, ye seamen, they're gone! The Invisible Ones are fallen! Their power is broken for all time to come! Take back your harbor, seamen! Take back your island, too!"

"Ah, Daron!" the mighty, squat, old figure roared. "Come on, lad—fight, don't waste good breath in idle talk! Drive out these scum! We'll bring the good, clean sea back to Tordu, and drive that stink of incense out forever!"

XII.

DARON looked up and ahead, where, in the early sunlight, the topmost parts of Nazun's blue-green temple loomed above the trees. He halted momentarily, and breathed deep of the clear, crisp mountain air.

Drathun, panting, looked up at him. "Ye be a determined man, Daron. This air is thin. Now while you rest and get a bit of breath, give me one more bit of fact. You drive me mad, friend! What was that whirring thing ye wore in your eye last night as you broke the sphere?"

Daron laughed, and pulled the little thing from his pocket. "Here, Drathun, look at it. Look through it, and press this button here."

The seaman did. A hole drilled through front and back, covered by smooth glass surfaces, was darkened suddenly as a plate of metal began to revolve, passing in front of it, then moving away, then circling back. Swiftly it gained, till the moving metal was but a blur, a haze that slightly dimmed the clear sight through the pierced hole.

The seaman grunted and passed it back. "A hole, with a bit of metal re-

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volving past so fast it is not seen. A blur—no more. Now what is the magic of this thing?"

"In the lowlands of Looz Yan, in the land of the West, I saw a similar thing. They have there great windmills, and this thing they call a *strobe*. Now the magic of the thing is this: if you peer through this at a whirling thing, that thing seems to stand still! When I looked through this at the ordered whirling of the lights of the sphere—the lights moved slow, and lost all order, and made no sense. The magic of their power was broken, just as my view of them was broken by that metal plate. Yet, because the men did not whirl in ordered circles, I could see them move in normal lines."

"Hm-m-m, there's more magic in simple things than I have thought. Now, one thing more—"

"We climb the mountain now," laughed Daron. "And while you go to Talun's temple, I pay respects to good Nazun—and visit Lady Tammar. Up, my friend."

Drathun grunted. "Aye, up. My bones grow wearied, for I've had no sleep this night, and action enough for a dozen nights. I'm no young man such as you, or those who seem to be following us."

Daron looked back for the first time. Below them, a rushing crowd of men and women struggled up the path, panting, calling, beckoning. Daron smiled.

"I think the Old Gods have gained in popularly, with the death of the new."

"So the wine-sot turns to water when his affliction is withdrawn," Drathun growled. "Half those who worshiped at the Temple Isle could not stay away, though they willed it. Well—we have given them sound cure for that! A hundred tons of fish were offered there to Talun this night, on the red-orange altar of the Invisible Ones!"

Daron walked on, steady and slow, as the mountain man must, who would gain his goal in health. The high hills of the Ind had taught him that, as well as other things. "The fools will kill themselves in running up that mountain."

A voice, a shade more piercing than the rest, reached up to them. "Daron—Daron—wait there!"

"Eh?" Daron turned. "Someone called my name."

Drathun laughed, a deep roar of amusement. "Are you fool enough to think that name unknown after this night! All Tordu calls your name now."

Daron shrugged. Again the call came up, clearer now, and the speaker, a long-legged youth, blowing like a spent horse, shouted out again. "Wait there for us, Daron! We've need of you!"

DARON turned and looked up at the tops of the temples above, clustering in the long-slanting rays of the risen sun. He looked back at the crowd, and the youth, and said to Drathun: "I'll wait, or the young fool will run his heart out."

"Elmanus"—called the youth. He slowed now, gulping deep breaths of air, and stumbled nearer, to throw himself on the pathside grass. "Elmanus is dead!"

"Eh?" snapped Drathun. "Old Elmanus gone?"

"Aye—he died this night."

A half dozen other men were struggling up, blowing hard. Long-legged farm men, and a seaman with rolling gait. The seaman laughed and panted all at once, and stuttered out the tale.

"Aye, the good old king is gone—may the gods protect his name—and gone happy, at that."

"What struck him down?" Daron asked. The king had been old, but seemed strong and well for all that.

"Joy," panted a horse-faced farmer. "And foolishness."

"He had a wine bottle in one hand," the youth panted.

"And a slave-maiden of his on the

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other," the seaman managed, between a laugh and a gasp for air.

"And the old fool danced a jig! At his age! He was howling in glee, and dancing round, and the girl had more sense than he!"

"She tried to stop him," the seaman nodded. "But he was howling praises on your name, and curses on the vanished Invisible Ones, and shrieking—"

"—that," the farmer interrupted gleefully, "he didn't give a damn what gods were gone, so one set or the other was destroyed."

"Ah," said Daron, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "Too much release from pressure—and he exploded."

"Aye, he tried to dance, and tripped and fell. His leg bent under him, and broke his hip. He was old and drunk with wine, and the shock killed him two hours gone."

"But," the seaman panted, "as he died, he was conscious again, and he said to his ministers, 'Bring me that Daron! Bring him here! He's the only one in all this land with force to be a king!'"

The crowd was growing, surging, panting all around them now, and shouting out to Daron. Suddenly they parted, and an officer in old Elmanus' livery came up, panting hard, his face red and sweating. "I near killed my horse, I fear, Daron, and these seamen and farmers beat me even so. King Elmanus is gone—gone from joy, and gone demanding that you take his place."

"I—" said Daron, and looked about the crowd. Every hot and sweating face looked up at him eagerly. Abruptly, he spotted one face that was cool, and slightly smiling, a round, rough-hewn face, with dark and heavy brows, and leathery, tanned skin.

Old Talun shut one eye slowly and nodded to him. Beyond, behind him, even, Daron saw a tall, lean man in blue-green robes.

"Now this land," said Daron with a sudden laugh, "is a broad, and right-good land, and one thing I like about it. It has good gods, gods who act and do, and fight for what is theirs! And, better, these gods pay those who help them in their own way, and show no stinginess!

"So be it then; not for King Elmanus alone, but if ye people—fishermen and farmers both—want me there—why there I'll go!"

There was a roar of cheers that washed up about him like a pounding surf, and a hundred hands laid hold of him. Before he well knew what had happened, he was riding down the mountainside on the shoulders of a howling, cheering crowd.

His roars and protests went unheard, and, at last, he grinned and accepted it. But, back across his shoulder, he looked toward Tammar's temple, glowing rose-quartz vanishing behind, glowing in the sun.

He'd reach that temple yet!

THE END.

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The Dawn Of Reason

by JAMES H. BEARD

Donald is sick and the fire won't burn,
And Dirk is cringing behind the churn.
A hapless baby, a cold, damp floor,
And a dog that never showed dread before.—
Why does Dirk tremble behind the churn?
What of a fire that will not burn?

I heard her stick as she tapped the road,
I saw her stoop as she caught the toad.
I could cut such a stick in any hedge,
I could catch such a toad on Deston's ledge.
What harm to a child if she catch a toad,
To fire, or Dirk if she tap the road?

What of a charm and what of a spell?
Are the ways of witches the ways of Hell?
A senseless jumble of sticks and bones,
A foolish mumble of sighs and groans—
Why should such nonsense make for Hell?
What good, what bad, in charm or spell?

If I were sure that she meant no ill,
She could sit inside when the wind is chill;
A cup of milk and a bit of bread,
And a rag to cover her poor old head.
It's hard on the old when the wind is chill,
I pity the old when they mean no ill.

If I were sure she caused Don's woe,
I'd feather a shaft and string Hal's bow.
I'd wait near the door till she passed again,
And laugh in her face when she screamed with pain.
If I were sure, I'd bend Hal's bow
And a singing shaft would bring her woe.

Is she really a witch or a lonely hag,
With a crooked stick and a dirty bag,
A crazy woman who does no harm,
Or a child of Hell with her spell and charm?
What does she hide in her dirty bag?
Shall I pity or hate the lonely hag?

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DREAMS MAY COME

By H. WARNER MUNN

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DREAMS MAY COME

What are the turning points—the decisions that lead a life up or down? Or—would they?

by H. WARNER MUNN

Illustrated by Wesso

PARTIALLY shielded by the bridge abutment, the woman stared into the windy night. Sleet hid the farther shore and, except for the melancholy and distant lowing of a tug and the occasional grinding of wheels on the El far overhead, she could have fancied herself alone upon a barren seacoast.

But that, she knew, was only a fancy. Beyond the scud lay the city, with lights, music and warmth to cheer the myriads of people it contained. Some were fortunate, most were contented, but every night a few sought lonely places, troubling no one, to do that which she soon must do.

However, a few moments could be spared to collect one's thoughts. She leaned back in the corner and closed her eyes. It was good that the wind had lost some of its sharpness.

If she could only have foreseen, she thought, that the dreams of her childhood were to have proved so brutally true! Could she have taken warning by them and avoided the actions which had inevitably brought her to this river bank on such a night?

Or had she merely possessed a gift of "seeing" denied to most people, but found it impossible to profit by her premonitions which, not heeded until now, had been almost forgotten?

There had been, she remembered, the young student of philosophy whose studies had made him somber and despairing. They had discussed the matter at length. She could see him now, as he twisted his glass and eyed the dregs of the stale beer.

"You know, Madge," he said, "it was a fine and wise provision of nature which hid the future from mortals, for who, knowing all that was to befall him, would choose to live?"

"Perhaps," she had replied, "if one really did know, he could change his future."

"Not so. The reasoning is fallacious, for if the future could be changed, then his foreknowledge would have been wrong and the future he had foreseen would not have been his real future at all.

"No, Madge, a man could as easily change his past as his immutable future. Seeing his life as a whole, he would find that little unconsidered events in his past had caused deviations through the years, as a misplaced pebble on the watershed can change the course of the rivulet and eventually affect the strength of the river.

"Now, if a man could but return into his past, remove those distant causes and have his life to live again, what a desirable thing that would be! But the future cannot be changed and neither can the past—we have only the present."

But could the past be changed?

Only in memory did the past live now. Then let her go back in memory and search for the deviation which had caused her life to be what it had been.

She *must* find that deviation, the exact infinitesimal fraction of a second that, taken in the wrong way, had

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changed, beyond repair, all her possible unformed future and brought her down the years to this dark stairway leading to the river.

Skip then, the years of misery and degradation! Pass over the dirty alleys and byways. Back, farther back, to the stage doors and hotels of the little towns, with which she was so familiar. Forget them and press on—deeper into the past!

There was her name high in the lights of the city, but the moment of deviation was not here! Other stages, other hotels, champagne, pearls—nights of hectic living, days of restless sleep. Back, back, further back!

Back to a rose perfumed night of June!

SHE opened her eyes and looked up into the dim face of the man who held her. She cuddled deeper into the nook of his arm, feeling his strength about her like a protecting wall. Shortly his life would be her life, his future, her future. Years without drudgery, years with glamour, sparkle—LIFE!

She sighed happily and raised her lips to be kissed. Sweetly distant from the dance pavilion, drifted strains of music.

She hummed:

"Margie, I'm always thinking of you, Margie."

"I'm always thinking of *you,* Margie!" and the impetuous, passionate kiss stopped both the humming and her breath.

"What a dear you are," she gasped, laughing. "Will you always be like that, Arnold?"

"Always and a day, honey. Don't you know it?"

"Perhaps. But suppose some day you say to yourself, quite quietly, of course, when I can no longer dance so well, when my voice is a little edgy—'Why, what *am* I doing here? She's passé!'

"I had a dream, I think, about this, when I was a little, little girl, a dream I couldn't understand. I was always dreaming such horrible dreams! For years and years I was so frightened! Almost every night I walked in my sleep, because of them. And some have since come true and brought me sorrow. I wish I could remember what I dreamed about you!"

The arm tightened about her.

"Maybe I have been a little wild, honey, but a man gets tired of wandering. You and I will go far. We'll be topnotchers, I tell you. We'll have the best act in the big time, but without all that, if you were lame, or couldn't sing a note, I'd love you."

"I wonder. I thought *I'd* always love Paul—"

"That clod? Forget him. You're with me tonight, tomorrow night and all the nights from now on."

She began to laugh hysterically. "How funny! Paul said just that when he proposed to me! Just exactly those same words!"

He looked nervously out of the coupé's rear window. "Not so loud, honey, somebody might hear you."

"Afraid?" There was a slight tinge of scorn in the tone. "I'm giving up my home, my husband, my reputation. Everything I have, and you're afraid to be seen with me!"

With a lithe twist she freed herself from the encircling arm and sprang out of the car.

All at once, it seemed that a little warning bell jangled in her brain. *This* was the turning point of her life! In this second she could make the decision that would affect all her years to come. Should she re-enter the car and make up, or should she shut the door?

His hand was outstretched but not to seize, only to urge. Her choice was free. Should she?

"Get in, you little fool!" he said, rudely, harshly. "I'll have your name

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in lights on Broadway in six months. You'll never see a chance like this again. We'll coin money!"

Suddenly she saw with dreadful clarity what she had been about to do, what she must escape from. She slammed the door.

"No, Arnold, we're through, finished! I never want to see you again. I'd die before I'd go away with you. Find some other girl who can dance and sing! I'm going back to Paul!"

She ran sobbing through the dark woods toward the distant music that sang as though to mock her:

"Bought a home and ring and everything
for Margie!"

AFTER that one secret lapse, she was a faithful wife, but more than mere fidelity is needed for a happy home and her home life was not happy.

An atrocious housekeeper, her slovenliness drew constant cutting remarks from her not-too-patient husband. Sparks flew as her quick spirit clashed against the sullen flint of his determination to enjoy a neat and peaceful existence. Quarrels were followed by mutual repentance, and hidden ill-feelings that would not, could not die.

A breach once begun, widens swiftly. There were times when each felt like a stranger to the other, as the home became only a house, and it seemed that any change would be better than to continue thus sordidly.

Yet for a long time there was no definite break. Children might in the end, have kept them together, but there were none and their interests in life also lay apart.

"I gave up a career to marry you," she once wept. "I could have gone to business college and made something of my life. But I didn't, and look what I got! You'll never be anything but a dumb, flat-footed cop!"

He did not answer, but nowadays he seldom did. Soon he went quietly out to his beat and left her to another lonely day.

The depression brought its changes and economics, little privations, reduced wages—a cheaper apartment, then a tenement.

Still they clung together in a shifting, crashing world, united by despair, needing each other even as their different natures repelled. The small extravagances which alone had made life bearable for her, were now no longer possible and temper was held in check even less often than before.

A chance word precipitated the final quarrel which ended when she said, calmly and deliberately: "I can understand now, how a woman can take an ax and finish off her whole family!"

The last words were shouted at a slamming door.

Returning late, he found her asleep. The words he had intended to speak were left unspoken. He would apologize tomorrow. With patient sympathy he bent and kissed her, then with a weary sigh, stripped off his wet clothing and went to bed. It was a bad night.

Long later when she was positive he was sound asleep, her hand stole beneath her pillow and found the staghorn handle of the carving knife she had secreted there hours before.

Then—Blood, Horror! Frenzied, fantastic, unconsidered, unplanned flight into the storm! Aimless walking, finally an empty taxi.

There was less than a dollar in her purse. She gave it all to the driver. "Take me north, as far as this will carry me. I want to get out of the city."

Immediately the words were spoken, she regretted them. Had she said the right thing? Would he suspect from her manner that something was wrong? Apparently not, for he touched his cap brim casually, flipped up the flag and started, threading through the occasional downtown traffic almost driven from the streets by the inclemency of the weather.

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THE WARMTH of the cab made her drowsy. He had to speak twice to rouse her. "This all right, lady?"

"Oh! Where are we?"

And when she knew—"Yes, quite all right. I have friends across the river."

"Give me the address and I'll take you there. This is a bad neighborhood."

"No, I'll walk. The cold will clear my head. It's only a short distance."

The cab door clicked behind her.

He called something after her, but the closed window and the wind in her ears muted the words below her hearing.

She hurried on, feeling his unbelieving eyes upon her back. Would he follow? Did he suspect that something was not as it should be?

No! Her purposeful manner had misled him. There was the mutter of the engine as he turned about. Yonder the red eye of the taillight vanished into the storm.

She had crossed the bridge and come to the spot before she consciously realized where she was. The driving sleet in her face and the harsh wind had combined with her distress to produce an effect like stupor. She moved more or less directly to her objective.

Now that she had arrived, her senses cleared. Before her were wet icy steps leading down, and beyond—darkness and oblivion for a lost soul.

She strained her eyes to peer into the watery dark. Was someone already there? Was that a huddled shape, crouched in wet rags, in the corner where the bridge abutment met the wall? She shook her head and dashed away the rime from her eyelashes. No, it was a trick of her vision. No one was there.

Lights fell upon her from a slowly moving car, rolling to a stop. Wet tires squealed upon the icy street. Cruisers, searching the city, searching for her? A shrill cry from the car! Meant for her? That taxi-driver! She *had* been recognized!

Steeling herself, she started down the slippery steps that led to the river—and rest.

Just for one last second she leaned, eyes closed, against the icy wall, near the bridge abutment.

"Oh, Lord!" she whispered passionately. "Why did I have to come to this? If only I hadn't married Paul! If only I had gone to business college and forgotten him.

"If I could live my life over again, live that *one second* over again, I would say, "'No! No! No!'"

"No. I am so sorry, Paul, but I have to say it."

Her voice trembled just a little as she raised her eyelids and looked at him fairly. She hoped he would not notice the quaver. At least her will was firm and even his warm kiss, his strong clasp could not swerve her resolution, she was confident.

Yet, she fended him away when he sought to draw her close. The hammock swung gently—like a cradle, she thought, the cradle she would never rock.

"But why? Margaret, darling—why? We love each other?"

This was terrible, much worse than she had expected, yet she could not draw back now.

"I love life more, Paul. I want luxuries, excitement, adventure. I want knowledge. All those, Paul. I would never make you a good wife, I am too restless, too discontented."

"Well, I know I'm not much!"

Now his dignity was ruffled. He was like a small boy, she thought. She could not let him know she loved him. She must be hard, ruthless, if she was to turn aside her destiny. She must hurt him!

"That's just it, Paul, I want things that you can't give me."

"I can give you—love."

Now he was standing over her. She

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would not look up, she must not! Would he take her in his arms again and kiss her fears away? She knew this time her resolution would break like spring ice.

Paul—Paul! Hold me close and mold my future for me! Paul!

Now he was going. He had not caught her agonized thought. He would never come back!

Paul!

She *could* call him, yet!

The gate clicked. Again there rushed over her the memory of that dream, that dreadful, torturing dream that was somehow realer than real.

A night of blood, of storm—Paul lying dead in blood-soaked sheets—blood on that knife! Ice in the air, in her heart—ice on the steps leading toward the black river.

He was gone beyond recall, yet she softly cried after him: "I did love you, Paul, so much! And I'll never marry anybody now, never in all my days."

YEARS followed years. There were years of study, of preparation. Years of secretarial work. Long, lonely years of adhering to her secret vow. Years of denying, of hurting others as she had hurt Paul, while her heart seemed to slowly wither, becoming dry, indurated.

Drab years spent at desks, her mind weary with business, drearily concerned with depressions, recessions, market quotations. Then feeling herself gray before her natural time, knowing herself respected, feared for her power by her underlings, distantly admired by her equals. Treated as a man among men in the world she had chosen, she lived a neutral life without other strong interests than her work.

The years passed slowly over her in their relentless march, bringing new honors. From secretary to head buyer was one step, on to district manager was a second. Her savings brought her a partnership; death and her business acumen made her head of the firm. Carmichael & Klein, Furriers, prospered.

Then at long last, on the Fifth Avenue windows, in Dun and Bradstreet's, in "Who's Who in America," the name Carmichael meant a great deal.

She sat alone one night in a lighted office, thinking, after the books had been locked away. Somewhere in the warehouse, the watchman was making his rounds, but if he was anywhere at hand just at present, the sound of sleet against the window hid his movements.

Long ago she had regretted her weak moment of superstition and that dream so pregnant of omen had become overlaid by life and almost forgotten, but the driving patter of the sleet brought it vividly back to her now.

Would events have come about as she had imagined them, if she had said, "Yes" to Paul? Could a slight turning from the path bring one to such a different end as the way she had trod had brought her?

She looked at her turquoise incrusted Gruen. Eleven thirty. Stevens would be waiting in the Rolls. The work was done, it was only ennui which had brought her here at all.

SHE YAWNED, stretching like a man and threw her head back, to gaze straight up into the dark interior of a sack descending silently upon her head. Instantly, she rolled out of the chair to the floor. A crushing weight fell upon her legs, a harsh grip pinioned her hands behind her. She opened her mouth to call to the watchman and received in it a choking wad of waste as a gag.

It was then she knew it was useless to struggle or hope for aid. One of the men was the watchman, another a discharged employee, the third a man whom she did not know, but whom she felt she had seen before in a dream and could not in any conceivable

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circumstance, forget. A scarred cheek, and a missing lobe on his right ear would see to that!

The watchman tried to put the bag over her head again, but the stranger who obviously gave the orders, motioned him to desist.

"No use in that," he growled. "She knows you and she'll know me, if ever she sets eyes on me again—won't you, old lady?"

She could only mumble, but she did that much and managed to nod her head.

"Well, we'll have to see to it then, that you don't," he chuckled and they went out, closing the door behind them.

They were away for what seemed a long time, while she listened to the pecking sleet and wondered if Stevens would become alarmed and call for her. Finally the door opened again, but it was not Stevens who entered.

The watchman and the other subordinate picked her up and, preceded by the scarred man, they passed through the echoing warehouse toward the rear entrance.

Rage filled her, to see the many empty hooks where costly furs had swung, but she was hurried on, unable to remonstrate, at such a pace that even the watchman grumbled: "Slow down, will you, Arnold? We can't see!"

Then, out of the warehouse and into a large sedan. She was unceremoniously thrown, on bales and bags of furs—and so, off through the storm.

With her head below the level of the window, she could not guess at her route, but kept working with tongues and teeth at the gag which was suffocating her. At length she spat it out, just as the brakes were applied and the wet tires squealed on the icy street.

The driver, Arnold, looked back over his shoulder and snarled: "Come on, hurry it up! Let's get out of here."

They dragged her out, neck and heels, and she could see. The icy scud hid the lights of the distant city, but before her was the heavy railing of a bridge and the first steps of a flight of stairs leading down.

She thought she saw a dark figure standing below, looking back, nearly down the steps, almost beyond her range of vision. She could not be quite sure, yet she screamed, "Help! Help!"

A violent blow dazed her and she could feel warm wetness on her neck, but she was not unconscious as they picked her up again.

"This must be a dream," she dazedly thought, "but I haven't had such a bad one since I was a little girl and scared my mother, because I walked in my sleep to get away from my dreams. How foolish these thugs will seem when I wake up!"

She chuckled quietly, as she felt herself being carried down the long icy stairway leading toward the river.

IT WAS very dark in the corridor and a draft blew cold against her bare ankles and knees beneath her nightdress. By the very absence of the night light always burning in her bedroom, she knew instantly that she had climbed, yet again in her sleep, the five flights of stairs leading to the attic and had been wandering about, hag-ridden by a dream.

She could feel the tears still wet upon her cheeks because of the dream. In the dream she had thought first of blood, then sleet, which, melting upon her, was drenching her skin.

It must have been the storm outside which had caused the dream; and that was another odd thing, because every night that she had walked thus in her sleep, either raindrops, hail or sleet had resounded upon the unsheathed roof of the echoing attic as though she stood within an empty drum.

She felt weak and dizzy and she knew that even yet she was not fully awake, for tears still flowed. She could not, would not stand another of these dreams.

What if her mother did not come

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sometime? The landing was only four steps wide! Twice she had been two steps from the edge, once, the last time, teetering, rocking on the very brink, the last step—emptiness!

Yet—she gasped at the enormity of the swift thought, the awful blasphemy of it. Would it not be better if she had taken the last step? Suppose the dreams she had been having would some day come true? One little second of firm resolve would forever prevent the dreadful possibilities of the future from ever becoming real!

In the corridor, at a distance, she heard swift steps, searching frantically, running now. That would be her mother, she knew, hunting for her little sleep-walking daughter. Just as before, she would be found on the verge of the stairwell.

She would be drawn back if she did not hurry, drawn back to safety and to walk through the long years again. Turn and twist as she might, she would be directed unyieldingly to one inexorable end—the end of every dream.

She *must* hurry. This was the crucial factor of her life, the deciding second, the one deviation from which return would be impossible! A bright light fell upon her face!

How very, very strange! Mother was behind her in the corridor, calling, running—yet there she was before her, too, beckoning, smiling, her eyes full of love and understanding! And how her robes shone!

She stepped forward across the landing, to mother's embracing arms—three—four— She took the fifth step.

The wind was in her ears as she fell, and a sharp keen sound. It was her mother's agonized cry, it was the squeal of wet tires on an icy pavement, it was the mournful sound of a tugboat on the river—it was a policeman's whistle.

She was smiling, as she fell into the abyss of eternity. She would not be hurt, she would not strike—people never did in dreams—she would not wake from this dream.

THE patrolman flashed his light into the corner again.

"Aye, its Meg, right enough," he said to his companion, unfeelingly, "the end ye'd be expectin' for the auld rip."

"Was she such a bad one, then?" the other queried.

"Hm-m-m." The grunt was eloquent. "Give us a hand with her, noo." His associate was a devout man and he doffed his cap. "Faith then, I'll not be doubting your word, if you say it, but I hope I have as easy an hour of my passing as she had. Twenty years have I covered the water front and never before seen a face like yon.

"Why, she looks as peaceful and contented as a baby asleep in the arms of her mother!"

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A GOD IN A GARDEN

By THEODORE STURGEON

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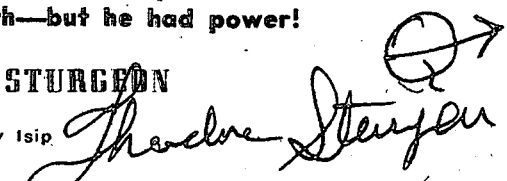
A GOD IN A GARDEN

He was most excessively ugly, and had queer ideas as to how to deal with truth—but he had power!

by THEODORE STURGEON

Illustrated by Isip



KENNETH COURTNEY, anyone could see, was plenty sore. No man works so hard and viciously digging his own lily pond on his own time unless he has a man-size gripe against someone. In Kenneth's case it was a wife who allowed herself to be annoyed by trifles. The fact that in her arguments she presented a good case made Kenneth all the angrier because it made him sore at himself too. Suppose he *had* come in at four a. m.? And suppose he *had* told Marjorie that he was working late? A lie like that was nothing—much. The only trouble with lies was that people—especially wives and bosses—can make such a damn fool out of a man when they catch him in one. All right; so it was a poker game, and he had lost a few bucks.

Marjorie, as usual, got all the details out of him; but she didn't stop there. She cited instance after instance when he had done the same thing. Her kick, it developed, was not so much the poker, but the fact that he had lied to her about it. Well, and why should a man brag to his wife about losing twenty-four bucks? If only she'd take his simple little explanations without all those fireworks, life would be more worth living. At least he wouldn't have to retreat into the garden and take out his fury on a pick and shovel.

He had reached about this stage in his mental monologue when his shovel rang dully against old Rakna.

Of course, he didn't know then that it was Rakna. He might well have stopped digging altogether if he had known. And then again, he might not. It didn't work out so badly in the end.

At any rate, all he knew was that there was an unyielding mass, and a large one, in his way, and he couldn't finish digging the little lily pool until he moved it. That *would* have to happen now, he thought bitterly. Everything's going wrong today.

He threw down his shovel and stamped up the garden path toward the house. Sore as he was, he still found room in his sulking mind to admire that garden. It began at the house, almost as if it were part of it, and led downward into a little gully. Kenneth had, by ranking trees and shrubs carefully, built a small lot up to look like something twenty times as big.

The sunken rockery, well out of sight, was the hidden theme of the whole; you stumbled on it, that rock garden; and yet because of the subtle placing of the trees and plants around it, you knew that it had been there all the time. There was a miniature bridge, and a huge pottery teapot—all the fixings. And once you were in the rock garden, you and your eye were led to the shrinelike niche by the lily pool.

For months Kenneth had been searching for an old idol ugly enough for that niche; he wanted it there so that it would frighten people. Something nice and hideous, to be a perfect and jarring foil for the quiet and beautiful effect of all that surrounded it. Kenneth determined

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to leave that niche empty until he found a stone face ugly enough to turn an average stomach—not wrench it, exactly; Kenneth was not altogether fiendish in his humorous moments!—but plumb ugly.

He went into the back kitchen—it served as a tool shed as well—and took down a crowbar. His wife came to the door when she heard him.

"How's it going?" she asked in the dutifully interested tone of a wife whose most recent words to her husband were violent ones.

"Swell," he said, his casualness equally forced.

"See?" she cried in feminine triumph. "You even lie to me about a little thing like that. If everything was swell down there, you wouldn't need a crowbar to dig with. This ground isn't rocky. Why can't you tell the truth just *once?*" Then she fled into her own territory, to be alone with her indignation.

Kenneth shrugged. Fight all morning with your wife, and you're up against things like that. He hesitated. She was probably crying, after that blowup. That's a woman for you. Fire and water all at once. Oh, well. He shrugged again and started back with his crowbar. The tears would wait, he reflected callously. There were more where they came from.

His conscience bothered him a little, though. Maybe she had something there. It did seem as if he couldn't tell her—or anyone—the absolute truth. It was just a conversational habit, that lying; but it did make trouble. But what could a man do? Maybe he'd be a little more careful in future—but, damn it, why did she have to be so picky?

As usual, he took it out in work, picking and prying and heaving. Well, this lump of brownstone or whatever it was, was something worth while working on. Not like digging in the soft earth around it. He began to forget about Marge and her annoyances in the task on hand.

SLIPPING the bar well under the brown mass, he heaved strongly and lifted it a few inches at the corner. Kicking a rock under it, he stepped back for a look at the thing, and was confronted by quite the most hideous imaginable face. He stared, shook his head, stared again.

"Well, I'll be . . . here's my idol, right where I need it. Now where the devil did that thing come from?" he asked no one in particular.

Yes, it was an idol, that brown mass in the half-finished lily pool. And what a face! Hideous—and yet, was it? There was a certain tongue-in-cheek quality about it, a grim and likable humor. The planes of that face were craggy and aristocratic, and there was that about the curve of the nostril and the heavily lidded eyes that told Kenneth that he was looking at a realistic conception of a superiority complex. And yet—again; was it? Those heavy eyelids—each, it seemed, had been closed in the middle of a sly wink at some huge and subtle joke. And the deep lines around the mouth were the lines of authority, but also the lines of laughter. It was the face of a very old little boy caught stealing jam, and it was also the face of a being who might have the power to stop the sun.

"Or a clock," thought Kenneth. He shook himself from his apathy—the thing nearly hypnotized by its ugliness—and walked around it, knocking off clods of dirt with his hands.

The face was lying on its side. Yes, he discovered, it was more than a face. A body, about half the size of the head, was curled up behind it. Kenneth shuddered. The body looked like unborn fetus he had seen at the Fair, floating in alcohol. The limbs were shriveled, and the trunk was big-bellied with an atrophied chest, jammed up against the back of that enormous head. The whole thing was, maybe, five feet high and three wide, and weighed a good ton.

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Kenneth went back to the house shrugging off an emotional hangover, and called up Joe Mancinelli. Joe had a two-ton hoist at his "Auto Fixery" that would do the trick.

"Joe," he said when he got his connection, "I want you to come right over with your truck and the two-ton lift. And listen. What I've got to lift will knock your eye out. Don't let it scare you."

"Hokay, Kan," said Mancinelli. "I feex. I no scare. You know me, boy!"

Kenneth had his doubts.

"Who are you calling, dear?" Marjorie called.

"Joe Mancinelli. I've got to have help. I ran across a . . . a big rock in the lily pool." There it was again. Now, why did he have to say that?

Marjorie came across the room and put her hands on his shoulders. "That's so much better, sweetheart. It isn't terribly hard to tell the truth, now, is it?"

Her eyes were a little red, and she looked very sweet. He kissed her. "I . . . I'll try, kiddo. You're right, I guess." He turned and went out to the shed, muttering to himself.

"Can you beat that? Tell her a lie and she raises hell. Tell her another and everything's all right. You can't win."

HE RIGGED a set of shear poles so that the chain hoist would have some kind of a purchase, and dragged them down to the rock garden. The sight of the half-buried idol gave him another fascinated shock. He looked at it more closely. It seemed old as time itself and carved—was it carved? Its execution made him think that if nature had carved rock into idols, then this was a natural work. And yet, it was so flawless! What human artist could do such macabre sculpture? Kenneth had seen the *striges* on the carved galleries on Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, and had thought that they were tops in *outré* art. But this— He shrugged and went back to the shed for a wire strap to slip under the thing, meeting Joe halfway to the house. Joe was staggering under the coils of chain over his shoulders.

"Hi, keed! Ware you got heem, thees beeg theeng?"

"Down at the bottom of the garden, Joe. What made you come over here so fast?"

"I like to see thees theeng make scare Joe Mancinelli," wheezed Joe.

"Well, look it over for yourself. Its half buried. I've got shear poles rigged. Be with you in a jiffy."

As he reached the shed, Kenneth smiled at the roar of polylingual profanity which issued from the rock garden. Joe was evidently impressed. Coming to the door with the wire strap in his hand, Kenneth called: "Scared, Joe?"

The answer came back hollowly: "I no scare. I sorry I come. But I no scare!"

Kenneth laughed and started down. He had taken about five steps when he heard a sound like a giant champagne cork, and Joe Mancinelli came hurtling up the path as if he were being chased by one of the devil's altar boys.

"Hey! Whoa there!" Kenneth called, laughing. "What happened? Hey!"

He surged forward and tackled the Italian low. They slid to a stop in a cloud of dust. "Easy, now, boy. Easy."

"The 'oist is down dere. You do you work, calla me, I come back, get heem. I don' *never* touch that theeng."

"All right, all right. But what happened?"

"You don' tell nobody?"

"No, Joe. Course not."

"So I see thees face. Thees not so gooda face. Maybe I scare, maybe no. I tell this face, 'I no lika you. So. I speet on you. So. *Ptui.*'" Joe turned white at the recollection, and swallowed hard. "Thees theeng shake all over like wan piece jally, is make the mouth like dees"—Joe pursed his lips—"an' . . .

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ptow! Is speet on me. So. Now, I go."

"You dreamed it," Kenneth said unconvincingly.

"So, I dream. But I tella you, boy, I go now to church. I take wan bat' in holy water. I light wan dozen candles. An' I bring you tomorra plenty dynamite for feex that theeng."

Kenneth laughed. "Forget it, Joe," he said. "I'll take care of old funnyface down there. Without dynamite."

Joe snorted and went back to his truck, starting it with a violence that set its gears' teeth on edge. Kenneth grinned and picked up the wire strap. "I no scare," he said, and laughed again.

HE was not, evidently, the only one who was amused by the episode. Old funnyface, as Ken had called the idol, really seemed to have deepened the humorous lines around his tight-lipped, aristocratic mouth. A trick of the light, of course. "You know," said Kenneth conversationally, "if you *were* alive you'd be a rather likable dog."

He burrowed under the idol and pushed the end of the strap as far under as he could reach. He was flat on his stomach, reaching out and down, with his shoulder against the mass of the thing, when he felt it settle slightly. He pulled his arm out and rolled clear, to see old funnyface settling steadily back into the hole.

"You old devil!" he said. "You almost had me that time. Bet you did that on purpose."

The idol's face seemed to have taken on a definite smirk.

"—is speet on me," Joe had said. Well, he was no better than Joe. He picked up a clod of earth, held it poised, and expectorated explosively, following up by ramming the clod into the sardonic lips of the idol. There was a small but powerful explosion and Kenneth found himself flat on his back six feet away.

Now Kenneth Courtney was no story-book hero. He was just an ordinary driver for an ordinary trucking firm. But in his unbrilliant but satisfying past, he had found that the best thing to do when he had this cold, crawling feeling at the pit of his stomach was to smile at his antagonist. Nine times out of ten, said antagonist was floored by it. So he reared up on his elbow and smiled engagingly at the idol.

The smile faded quickly; one glance at the idol's mouth took care of that. The lower lip was quivering, like an angry child's, or like a railroad bull about to take a poke at a tramp. Suddenly it snapped shut. The jaws bulged and contracted, and little bits of earth fell into the hole around its cheeks.

More than a little shaken, Kenneth got his feet under him and walked over to the idol. "I'd bury you where you are, tough guy, but you're in my lily pool. Come up out of there!"

He went furiously to work, rigging the hoist over the idol. In a remarkably short time he had the ends of the strap hooked into the chain-fall, and was heaving merrily. To his surprise, he found that the idol came up easily—there could not have been more than three or four hundred pounds' load on the hoist. He stopped hauling and stood off a bit.

"Why, you son of a gun!" he exclaimed. "So you've decided to cooperate, hey?"

It was true. The idol's emaciated legs and arms straddled the pit, and were lifting the massive head steadily. Even as he watched, the chain-fall began to slacken as the weight came off it. By this time Kenneth was almost beyond surprise at anything.

"O. K., buddy," he cried, and heaved away. Higher and higher rose the idol, until the shear poles creaked and their bases began to sink deeper into the soft earth. Finally it swung clear. Gauging the distance nicely, Kenneth toppled the shear poles and the idol swung face inward into the niche, landing with a

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rubbery thump. Kenneth grinned.

"Stay that way, old boy," he told the idol. "You're no uglier behind than you are face-outward." He threw the strap over his shoulder, lifted the shear poles at the lashing and dragged them back up to the shed.

When he came back with a spouting garden hose, the idol was facing outward.

"On second thought," said Kenneth conversationally, as he busily sluiced down that hideous, humorous face, "I don't blame you. You are a little more presentable stern-foremost; but then you're a damsite more likable this way." Kenneth was scared stiff, but he wouldn't show it, not even to an old graven image.

"That's much better," said the idol, blinking the mud out of its eyes. Kenneth sat down weakly on the nozzle of the hose. This was the payoff.

"DON'T sit there looking so stupid!" said the idol irritably. "Besides, you'll catch cold, holding down that hose."

Kenneth's breath came out in a rush. "This is too much," he gasped. He was more than a little hysterical. "I . . . I . . . in just a minute I'll wake up and smell coffee and bacon. I don't believe there *is* a crusty old idol, or that it talked, or that—"

"Get off that hose," said the idol, and added meaningly. "And dry up."

Kenneth rose and absently began wringing his clothes. "What sort of a critter are you?"

"I'm a god," said the idol. "Name's Rakna. What's yours?"

"K-Kenneth Courtney."

"Stop stammering, man! I'm not going to hurt you. What's the matter; didn't you ever see a god before?"

"No," said Kenneth, a little relieved. "You don't seem like . . . I mean—" Suddenly something about the god, something in his incredibly deep eyes, made it very easy to talk. "I thought gods lived up in the clouds, sort of. And anything I ever read about it said that gods come to earth in fire, or lightning, or in the shape of some kind of animal, or—"

"Nuts," said the god.

Kenneth was startled. "Well, gods don't talk like that . . . uh . . . do they?"

"You heard me, didn't you?" asked Rakna. "Think I'm a liar?" The piercing gaze made Kenneth wince. "Like you? No, you dope; I was created by common people, who thought common thoughts and spoke in a common way. Not in this language, of course, or in this time. But people are pretty much the same, by and large. Think the same way, y'know."

"Well, what people were you the god of?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know if I told you. They disappeared quite a while back. Used to be one of them buried near me. Had his thigh bone poking into my . . . well, never mind. Anyhow, he faded out. There's not a trace of those people left anywhere. This earth has been here quite a while, you know. They come and they go."

"How come you can speak English, then?"

"Because I know everything you know, which isn't much, by the way, and considerable besides. Every time a thought passes in that gab factory of yours I know what it is. You drive a truck. Your wife's named Marjorie. She's very capable; knows all about budgets and calories and such. She thinks you're a liar."

"If you're a god," Kenneth said quickly, to change the subject, "why couldn't you dig yourself out?"

"Listen, lamebrain, who said I wanted to dig myself out? Can't a god grab forty winks once in a while?"

"Forty winks? How long were you asleep?"

"*I* don't know. Couple of hundred

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million years, maybe. I'll tell you when I get a chance to look at the stars."

"But there wasn't any earth that long ago!"

Rakna leered at him. "Vas you dere?"

Kenneth sat down again, this time on dry ground. Standing was too much of a strain.

"Hm-m-m . . . I see steam's back again. Electricity? Yes. You're getting along, you people. Atomic power? Oh, well, it won't be long now. Levitation? Trans—"

Kenneth had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being read like a newspaper—a back number at that. He was a little annoyed, and besides, those waves of beneficence still flowed from Rakna's eyes. Kenneth's fear departed completely, and he rose to his feet and said:

"Listen. All this is a little too strong for me. As far as I'm concerned, your somebody's half-ton Charlie McCarthy. Or maybe you're wired for sound."

RAKNA chuckled deep in his jowls. "Aha!" he rumbled. "A skeptic, no less! Know what happens to little mortals who get cocky? They suffer for it. In lots of ways. For instance, I can increase the density of your bones so that your own skeleton will crush you to death. Like *this!*"

The deep eyes turned on Kenneth, and he fell to the ground, crushed there by an insupportable and increasing weight.

"Or I can put your eyes on your fingertips so that you have to see with your hands."

Kenneth found himself on his feet again. He was staring at the ground, although his head was up. He saw the world reel about him as he clapped his seeing hands to his face. He cried out in an ecstasy of terror.

"Or," continued the god conversationally, "I can finish your lily pool for you and drown you in it."

Kenneth was hurled forward into shallow water, where no water had been before. He bumped his head stunningly on a solid concrete surface and lay there, immersed and strangling. Suddenly he found himself before the idol again. His clothes were dry; his eyes were in place; everything was quite, quite normal. Except that damned idol, and the brand-new lily pool. It had all taken possibly eight seconds.

"Or—" said the idol

"O. K., O. K.," said Kenneth weakly. "You win."

"THAT'S better," smirked Rakna. "Now listen to me. I don't want you to think I intend any harm! I don't. But unfortunately for my character I was created in more or less a man's image. The only faults I have are human ones, and even though I have improved considerably, I still possess those faults. One of them is vanity. I don't like to be called a weakling any more than you do. You'll take a poke at someone who calls you a pansy; all right, so will I. Savvy?"

Kenneth nodded.

"Right. All I want from you is a little consideration. Keep your mouth shut about me; I don't mind being admired, but I don't want to be a museum piece." Amused pity suddenly manifested itself on those craggy features. "Look, Kenneth, I've been a little hard on you. After all, you did give me a comfortable place to sit. Anything I could do for you?" Again those fear-erasing waves of friendliness. Kenneth stopped trembling.

"Why . . . I don't know. I've got a good job, and about everything I want."

"How about your wife? Are you altogether happy?"

"Why, sure I am. Well . . . that is—"

"Never mind the details. I know all about it. She calls you a liar and she's

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right, and you wish something could be done about it. Want me to make you incapable of telling a lie? I can do it."

"You mean—"

"I mean that every time anyone asks you a question you'll be able to tell them only the truth. How much money you have, what you did that night in Denver"—Kenneth quailed at that—"what you honestly think of your boss—"

"Oh, no!" said Kenneth. "That doesn't sound so hot."

Rakna grinned. "All right. Let's do it this way. Everything you say will be the truth. If you say black is white, it will be white. If you tell your wife you were working late instead of playing poker, then it will be true. See what I mean?"

Kenneth couldn't see anything wrong in that. "By golly, Rakna, you've got something there. Can you do it?"

"I've done it," said Rakna. "Look. See that chain hoist you hauled me up with?"

Kenneth glanced at it. "Yeah."

"Now tell me it's not lying here, but it's in the shed."

"It's in the shed," said Kenneth obediently.

The hoist vanished. A clinking of chain drifted down the garden path. Rakna grinned.

"Hot cha!" exclaimed Kenneth. "Nothing but the truth. Thanks a million, Rakna. You're an ace!"

"Skip it," said the god. "Now beat it. I want to think."

Kenneth started up the path, his surliness quite gone and a new spring in his step. Rakna gazed after him and chuckled deeply.

"Cocky little devil," he said. "This ought to be good." He relaxed and let his mind dwell casually on profound matters.

AS HE came to the turn in the path and out of the range of old Rakna's quizzical gaze, Kenneth's steps suddenly slowed and he began to wonder a little at all this. Surely a thing like this couldn't be true! He found himself in a very precarious mental state. He could go back again and see if there really was a god in his garden, or he could blindly believe everything that had happened, or he could go on as usual and try to forget the whole thing. The worst part of it all was that if it all was a dream, he was probaby nuts. If it wasn't a dream, who was nuts? He shrugged. Once you got used to the idea of having a god in your back yard you could get a kick out of it. But how did the old sourpuss think he could prove his power by making Kenneth speak the absolute truth? Not, of course, that there was anything in it.

Marjorie heard him coming into the house.

"Hurry and wash up, darling," she called briskly. "Supper's on!"

"Be right with you, kid!" He scrubbed up, put on a clean shirt and came down to the dining room. In one of the steaming dishes on the table was turnips. He frowned. His wife noticed, and said forlornly:

"Oh, dear, I forgot. You don't like turnips!"

"Don't be silly," he lied gallantly. "I love 'em."

No sooner had he said the words than the lowly turnips seemed to take on a glamour, a gustatory perfection. His mouth watered for them, his being cried out for them—turnips were the most delicious, the most nourishing and delightful food ever to be set on a man's table. He loved 'em.

A little startled, he sat down and began to eat—turnips more than anything else. "Most delicious meal I ever had," he told a gratified Marjorie. No sooner said than done. It *was*. And as a matter of fact, it was strictly a budget meal—one of those meals that good little managers like Marjorie Courtney throw together to make up for yester-

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day's spring chicken. She was vastly flattered.

"You must have worked terribly hard to fix up a meal like this," Kenneth said with his mouth full. "You must be tired."

She was, suddenly, a little. Kenneth laid down his fork. "You *look* tired, dear." Lines appeared on her fresh little face. "Darling!" he said anxiously. "You're terribly tired!"

"I don't know what's the matter," she said haggardly.

"Marjorie, sweet, you're sick! What is it?"

"I don't know," she said faintly. "All of a sudden I feel—" Her head dropped on the table. He caught her in his arms.

"Buck up, kid. I'll carry you upstairs. Hang on, now. I'll get you settled and call a doctor." He crossed the room and started up the stairs.

"I'm too heavy—" she murmured.

"Nonsense!" he scoffed. "You're as light as a feather!"

Her body seemed to lift out of his arms. He was halfway up the stairs by this time, poised on one leg, about to take another step. The sudden lightening of her body had the effect, on him, of a kick on the chin. Down he went, head over heels, to the bottom of the stairs.

It was a nasty jolt, and for the moment he couldn't see anything but stars. "Marge!" he muttered. "You all right? Say you're all right!"

A whimpering cry cleared his head. Marjorie was settling gently down toward him, bumping each step lightly—lightly, like a floating feather.

He reached out dazedly and took her hand. She came drifting down toward him as he sprawled there, until their bodies rested together.

"Oh, God," moaned Kenneth. "What am I going to do?"

He rose and tried to help her up. His gentle pull on her arm sent her flying up over his head. She was crying weakly, hysterically. He walked into the living room, his wife literally streaming out behind him, and held her poised over the day bed until she rested on it. Then he ran for the telephone.

BUT as the singsong "Operator!" came over the wire he laid down the receiver, struck with a thought. Bit by insane bit he pieced the thing together; Rakna's promise; the power that he now had over the truth—the whole crazy affair. In the last few hectic minutes he had all but forgotten. Well, if he could do it, he could undo it.

He went back to his wife, drew a deep breath, and said:

"You're not sick. You weight one hundred and fourteen."

Marjorie bounced up out of the day bed, shook her head dizzily, and advanced toward him. Kenneth sensed thunder in the air.

"What sort of a joke was that?" she demanded, her voice trembling. Kenneth thought a little faster this time. "Why, darling! Nothing has happened to you!"

Marjorie's face cleared. She stopped, then went on into the dining room, saying: "What on earth made us wander out here when we should be eating?"

"Nothing," said Kenneth; and that seemed to tie up all the threads. He felt a little weak; this power of his was a little too big to be comfortable. He noticed another thing, too: he could make his wife forget anything that happened, but he still knew about it. Lord! He'd have to be careful. He had a splitting headache, as always when he was excited, and that didn't help any. Marjorie noticed it.

"Is something the matter, Kenny?" she asked. "Have you a headache?"

"No," he said automatically; and as he said it, it was true! For the first time he grinned at the idea of his power. Not bad! No more toothache, stomachache, business worries—business— Holy

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smoke! He was rich! Watch.

"Marge," he said as she put two lumps in his coffee, "we have twenty thousand dollars in the bank."

"Yes. I know. Isn't it nice? Cream?

"You know? How did you know?"

"Silly! I've always known. You told me, didn't you? Anyway, I've known about it quite a while, it seems to me. Why?"

"Why?" Kenneth was floored. Then he shrugged. The truth was like that, he guessed. If a thing was true, it required no explanation; it just *was*. He finished his coffee and pushed back his chair. "Let's go to a show, kiddo."

"That would be nice," she said. "Just as soon as I get the dishes done."

"Oh," he said airily. "They're done."

She turned astonished eyes to him. It occurred to him then that if he persisted in this sort of thing he might make her doubt her sanity. A bank account was one thing; but the dishes—

"I mean," he explained. "We did them."

"Oh . . . of course. I . . . well, let's go."

He made up his mind to go a little easy thereafter.

That was the beginning of a hectic three weeks for Kenneth Courtney. Hectic, but fun, by golly. Everything came his way; everything he said was true, and if everything he did wasn't quite right, it could be fixed. Like the time he was driving his big twelve-speed Diesel tractor-trailer job through the mountains one night, and a light sedan whipped around a hairpin turn and steered straight between his headlights.

"Look out!" he called to Johnny Green, his helper, who was in the bunk over the seat. "We've going to smash!"

And as the car approached, as their bumpers practically kissed, Kenneth remembered his powers. "We missed him!" he bellowed.

Miss him they did. The car vanished, and a second later its careening tail light appeared in the rear-view mirror. It just wasn't possible—but it was true.

He did learn to be careful, though. There was the time when he casually remarked that it was raining cats and dogs. That mistake cost him half an hour of running madly around telling people that it really wasn't raining cats and dogs, you know, just raining hard. The thing would have made quite a sensation if he had not thought of declaring that it had not rained at all that day.

His influence was far-reaching. One night he happened to tune into a radio soprano who was mutilating Italian opera to such an extent that Kenneth inadvertently remarked: "She's lousy!" Thirty seconds later the loud-speaker gave vent to a series of squeaks and squalls which had no conceivable connection with Italian opera.

HE HAD to watch his language. No author or orator was ever so careful about avoiding clichés and catch-phrases as was Kenneth Courtney in the weeks in which he enjoyed his powers. A friend once remarked that he had been working all day; "I'm dead!" he said. Kenneth turned pale and solemnly swore that he would never use *that* expresion again. He began to notice things about the way we speak: "I'm starved." "You're crazy." "You look like a ghost." "I hate you." "You're a half-wit," or "idiot" or "imbecile." "You never grew up."

At first Kenneth was a good man to have around the house. From his easy-chair he did the housework, made the beds, cooked a delicious series of meals, redecorated the living room, and renewed every article of clothing and linen in the house. Pretty soft. But he found that the wear and tear of the thing was too much for his wife.

Though Marjorie had every evidence that the work was done, still she had no memory of doing it—unless, of course,

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THE YELLOW HOARD

Prof. Archer S. Gray,
famous explorer, presented
each of his friends with
curious little clay bricks—the
receipt of which always led to murder.

Until—
The Avenger's friend received one—
Then the trail led to treasure—
Through a most baffling mystery.

It's a story of high adventure
which introduces Nellie, as
pretty as a Dresden doll, but
as tough and clever with
her hands as a top-notch
wrestler or boxer.

THE AVENGER

ON SALE SEPTEMBER 6th

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she remarked on it to Kenneth. In that case she would be told, and truthfully, that she had done the work herself. But she began to worry a little about her memory; at times she thought she was losing it altogether. You don't cook a six-course dinner without remembering anything about it except the fact that you cooked it; and Marjorie even had to be told about that. So Kenneth, after a while, left the house to its appointed boss, and amused himself elsewhere.

An Kenneth never told her—or anyone—about Rakna and what he had done. Why? Because the conviction that matter-of-fact, efficient little Marjorie Courtney wouldn't believe such a far-fetched tale was so deep-rooted that it never occurred to him to use his power on her. She had, in the past, called him a liar so many times with justice that he felt subconsciously that she would do it again. That, incidentally, *might* have been Rakna's doing.

Well, for three weeks this went on. Kenneth had money to burn, all the leisure time he wanted—he worked now for the fun of it—and life was a song—in swingtime, of course, but still a song. He had been so busy experimenting and amusing himself that he hadn't thought of really celebrating. And on one memorable Saturday night he went downtown and threw a whingding that made history.

Only an old sailor or an ex-soldier or a man with Kenneth's powers can throw that sort of a binge. He was not a heavy drinker; but every time that sickly, cloying feeling came over him he'd say, like every other swiller: *"I'm* not drunk. I may be tight, but I'm not drunk." And then he could start over. Never mind the details; but let this suffice: the next morning, stocks on liquor jumped two points, and on the various hangover remedies, six to ten points. Not a sober man went out of a barroom anywhere in town that night. Kenneth painted the town bright, bright red; and he and all the tipplers he could possibly find—and everything was possible to Kenneth!—literally drank the town dry.

He reeled home about six in the morning. He had poured some two hundred gallons of the best down his throat, and his breath would fell a strong man at thirty yards. Yet he was only delightfully high; he even remembered to eradicate the breath as he came in the door, by remarking that it was sweet as a baby's.

MARJORIE was up when he entered rockily, flinging his hat to the right, his coat to the left, and himself on the carpet. She said nothing, which was bad; just walked daintily around him and upstairs. He called her, but she kept on going.

"Oh, oh!" he said. He started after her, found the stairs a little too much for him, and so declared himself on the second floor. Once there, he stumbled in on Marjorie. She was packing.

"What goes on?" he wanted to know.

"I'm going to stay with mother for a while," she said tiredly. "Till you sober up."

"Sober up?" he repeated. "Why, I'm perfectly sober!" It was true, of course; but that made no difference. Just because a thing is basically, unalterably true doesn't mean that a woman and a wife is going to believe it. She kept packing.

"Now wait a minute, darling. Haven't I been good to you? What do you want me to do? Marjorie!" This was the first time she had pulled anything like this. He was flabbergasted.

She turned toward him. "Kenneth, I'm sorry, but I've got to go away from you for a while. Maybe forever," she added forlornly. "You see, something's happened to me . . . to us . . . in the last few weeks. I don't know what it is, but I think sometimes that I'm

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losing my mind. I forget things . . . and you, Kenneth! I can't understand what you're up to, with all your running around at all hours of the night, and the strange things that are happening. The other day I was in the living room and just happened to be looking at Aunt Myrtle's vase when it disappeared . . . vanished, just like that." She snapped her fingers.

Kenneth swore under his breath. That was a slip. He had hated that eyesore, and happened to think of it one day when he was on the road. He had stated that it no longer existed, forgetting that his wife might be in the room at the time.

"So you see I need a rest, Kenneth." She began to cry, but turned to her packing all the same. Kenneth tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him away.

Now Kenneth had learned during his year or so of marriage that the only way to stop one of these bickerings was to tell the truth, take his medicine like a man, and then be forgiven. Well, he reasoned, the truth wouldn't be so hard to tell this time. Again, it never occurred to him to tell her that nothing was the matter, that she wasn't angry and frightened. No, the only thing he could think of that would fill the bill was to share his secret about the god in the garden. That was the cause of it all, so it might be the cure.

"Marjorie . . . I can explain everything."

"Oh, yes," she said bitterly. "You always can."

He swallowed that and tried again. "Listen, darling, please. I was digging our lily pool, and—"

As the story unfolded she stopped her packing and sank down on the edge of the bed. His words carried a peculiar conviction, and he thrilled to the dawning belief in her face.

"—and so last night I thought of celebrating it. It would do no harm that couldn't be set right. See? So don't go, sweetheart. There's no need—"

The remark brought her engrossed mind back to the fact that she had been in the midst of leaving his bed and board when he had interrupted with this story, this—yes—preposterous story. She remembered that she was angry at him, and that fact was quite sufficient. He was so horribly smug, so terribly in the right about everything. Marjorie Courtney was by no means the first woman who, incensed, refused to believe the absolute truth simply because that truth put her in the wrong.

"I don't believe any of it!" she said firmly. Suddenly she drew back a little. "Kenneth . . . I do believe that it's *you* who are losing your mind, not I . . . Ohhh—"

KENNETH realized then that if she kept that up any longer she'd have herself convinced. That wouldn't do. He took her by the arm, hurried her out and down the stairs. "Come on," he said grimly. "You're about to be introduced to a god. That'll show you who's crazy."

She struggled a little, but allowed herself to be forced out into the yard and down the garden path. She wouldn't believe it! She wouldn't!

As they reached the pool she looked up at Kenneth's face. It was grimly determined; she was frightened. She did not see old Rakna grin and raise his carven eyebrows.

"Rakna!" called Kenneth. "My wife won't believe in you. What can I do to convince her?"

Marjorie said brokenly: "It's just an old statue . . . I know . . . I saw the hideous thing last week . . . it can't talk . . . It's stone—"

Rakna said: "I *am* stone, to her. I told you I didn't want anybody but you knowing anything about me."

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"But . . . she's my wife!" cried Kenneth.

Marjorie said: "What?"

"You see," said Rakna, "she can't hear me. She thinks you're talking to a piece of stone." The god laughed richly. "I don't blame her for thinking you're nuts!"

"Skip that," Kenneth said angrily. "She's going to leave me if I can't convince her I'm sane. She just won't believe me. I thought you said I would always speak the absolute truth? Why won't she believe me?"

"Kenneth!" gasped Marjorie hysterically. "Stop it! Stop talking to that awful statue! Please, Kenneth!"

Rakna laughed again. "Look, dope, don't you know that truth, as such, does not exist to an angry woman, unless she happens to agree with it? As for my doing anything about this, that's up to you. You got yourself into this. I found it most amusing, too. Now get yourself out. That ought to be funnier."

"Why you old . . . Listen, Rakna, give me a break, will you?" said Kenneth desperately.

Rakna just chukled.

Suddenly Marjorie fell on her knees beside Kenneth. She looked up at him with tear-filled, imploring eyes. She was incredibly lovely, lovely and pitiful as she knelt there.

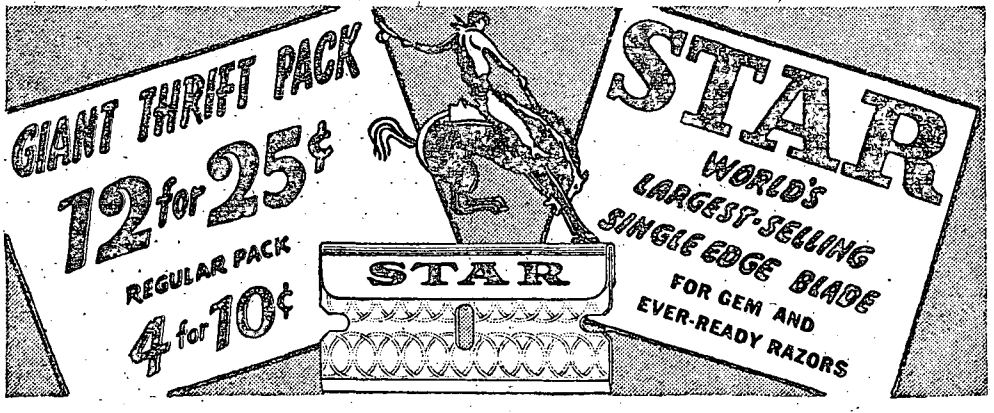
"Kenneth," she moaned. "Oh, darling, I love you . . . I always will, no matter what happens to you, no matter—" She drew a great shuddering sigh, and Kenneth's heart and soul went out to her. "Tell me you're all right, Kenneth. Tell me this is all a dream. Oh, God . . . Kenneth! I'm your wife, and I'm crying for you! You're out of your mind! This idol . . . its power over you—"

Kenneth dropped beside her and held her close. Rakna chuckled again—his last chuckle.

Kenneth whispered in Marjorie's ear: "Darling, it's all right! I'm quite sane, truly I am. Just forget everything. There is no Rakna . . . you're right. Just a brownstone idol. Rakna has no power over me. I have no powers that he gave me—" Anything to comfort her. He murmured on and on.

They crouched there, those two young people, at the foot of an incredibly old brownstone idol, who was once Rakna, a god with the power of a god. The stone idol had no power over Kenneth Courtney, for Kenneth had spoken the truth when he said those words.

They lived, of course, happily ever after. And if you visit them, Kenneth may take you into the rock garden and show you his ugly old idol. It has a craggy, aristocratic face, with an expression on it of rueful humor. He was a good sport, that Rakna. Kenneth, by the way, still lies to his wife.



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ANYTHING

By PHILIP ST. JOHN

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ANYTHING

"Anything" he said would do for his name, and anything he said he'd do—and did! To the acute discomfort of the busybodies who don't do anything!

by PHILIP ST. JOHN

Illustrated by Isip

UNTIL Anything came to Carlsburg, I thought I knew the town like the back of my hand. A small-town paper is built on knowledge of the people it serves, rather than news value, and I'd been editing the weekly *Union Leader,* unofficially known as the Onion, for eight years. But the rumors I heard of the Man in Brown refused to fit into the picture.

In common with most small farming communities where the population is falling instead of rising, gossip was the leading rival of the newspaper; and in Carlsburg, it had been raised to a high art. From Aunt Mabel's dizzy spells to Uncle Tod's rheumatism, everybody's business was common property, and a stranger should have been dissected and analyzed within three days.

The Man in Brown wasn't. There were rumors, of course, but they all boiled down to practically nothing. Apparently, he'd first been seen about a week before, looking for work, and vouchsafing no information about himself. For some reason, nobody had thought to ask him who he was or where he came from—which was the mystery of the affair.

Jim Thompson dropped into the *Union Leader's* office one morning, to talk about some advertising and to relay his wife's orders. Jim was the owner of the local lumber yard and hardware store, and one of the best advertisers I had, even if he did wear himself bald trying to save pennies.

"Now, Luke," he told me, "it's up to you to find out about this here Brown Man, and Molly don't want any nonsense. That's what you're supposed to be doing, running a newspaper like you are. Molly swears she'll drop her 'scription and get the Club to do the same, if you don't find out about him. He's been in town over a-week now, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh." Molly ran the Carlsburg Culture Club, and I'd had trouble with her before. "I've been trying to get the facts, Jim, but the lack of information is stupendous. Anyhow, I heard yesterday that your wife has already met the fellow, which is more than I've been able to do. What'd she say about him?"

"He come to the door asking for work, seems like; said he didn't want no pay. Now I ask you, don't that sound half-cracked?" Thompson reached over for my tobacco and filled his pipe, fishing around for a match until I handed him one. "Molly give him the mower and told him to cut the lawn, which he did right smart and proper. Seems like she no more'n stepped back inside when the job was done. So she give him the bowl of bread and milk he wanted—that's all he'd take—and away he went."

It was the same story with minor variations, that I'd heard all week; he was continually searching for odd jobs, and taking his pay in bread and milk, or a place to sleep for the night. "But didn't she ask him where he was from and what he intended doing?"

"That's the funny part of it all. You

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know how Molly is?" Jim grinned, and I nodded. Even in Carlsburg, Molly's nose for scandal enjoyed a large reputation. "Somehow, she never got around to asking him. They kinda talked about the weather and them begonias, but all the questions just slipped plumb out of Molly's mind. Matter of fact, she didn't even get his name."

Thompson took out his fountain pen and turned to the bench where I kept the ink, but stopped halfway. "Speak of the devil," he muttered, pointing across the street. "Here he comes now, headed right this way. Now see what you can make of him."

The man crossing the street was ordinary enough in appearance, a little over average height, with a weathered brown hat and wrinkled brown suit hanging loosely on him. His very lack of distinction made description impossible, except for the easy humor of the smile he was wearing. With a loose springy stride he came up the steps and leaned against the door facing me.

"Good morning, gentlemen. You're Luke Short, the editor here, I believe?" The voice was soft and casual. "I'd like to run an advertisement in the paper if you'll let me pay you in work. I haven't much use for money."

"Know anything about type setting?" I asked. My regular one-man staff had been sick, and I needed a man to replace him in the worst way. "If you do, I'll run your item and pay regular wages."

He sauntered in. "Anything. I'm sort of an all-around worker, from baby-minding to house building. Only I don't work for money; just give me a place to stay and a couple of meals a day, and we'll call it square. That's what I wanted to say in the ad. You want the setting done now?"

"This afternoon." I pulled out a galley proof and held it out as a rough test; most people, I've found, don't know 6-point from great primer. "What size type is this?"

"Pica, or 12-point on the caption; the rest's brevier, or 8-point, upper and lower case. I told you I did anything—use a stick or linotype, run a job press, make cuts, write copy—anything What'll I do this morning, and where'll I sleep?"

Jim Thompson had finally succeeded in filling his pen and was sticking a few blotters and envelopes in his pocket. He piped up. "You say you do building work?"

"Anything." The Man in Brown laid peculiar stress on the word whenever he used it.

"Well, I'm putting a new lumber shed up at the yard, and we're a mite short-handed." The truth of the matter was that Jim had lost his workers because they asked more than he was willing to pay, and because his fat wife tried to run their private lives. "If you want work so bad, you can lay asbestos shingles, whenever Luke don't want you. Sure you don't want money? O. K., there's a cot in the back office where you can sleep. That O. K.?"

"Perfectly. And you'll find me a rapid worker, I'm sure."

They were almost out of range before I remembered enough to shout after him. "Hey, you! What'll I call you?"

He grinned back over his shoulder. "Anything," he answered, and it struck me as being appropriate, at that.

I HAD to cover the Volunteer Fire Department's proposed drive for money that noon, and it wasn't until I neared the office that I remembered Anything. I also remembered that the old second-hand linotype was out of order as usual, and needed a new cam installed before it could be used. Well, the paper had gone to bed late often enough before, so there was no use worrying.

Anything had his feet cocked up on the desk when I came in, and a pile of galley sheets lay beside him. "Setting's all done," he said. "Want me to make

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it up while you finish that story you've been out on?"

I looked at my watch and calculated the time needed to set the work I'd left for him. It didn't work out right, and a linotype refuses to be hurried, but there was no disputing the galley sheets; the work was done. "What about the linotype?"

"Oh, I fixed that. Had a little trouble finding whether you had a new cam, but my nose led me to it. By the way, your former helper called in to say the doctor says no more work for him. I stuck a 'faithful service' notice in the editorial column."

"I suppose you finished laying Thompson's shingles this morning, in your spare time?"

The sarcasm didn't register. "I finished about eleven-thirty—he only had eight thousand to lay. I spent my spare time over at the garage helping Sam White tear out and overhaul a tractor engine. How about that make-up?"

I gave up. "O. K., just as soon as I proofread these sheets."

"No need. They're all perfect now. I found a few broken face type when I ran off the proofs, and fixed that up." There was no hint of boasting, and his voice was casual; but I'd punched ETAOIN SHRDLU myself, so I had no faith in perfect typesetting. I went over the proofs carefully—and there were no errors!

We put the paper to bed ahead of schedule for the first time in a year, and I took Anything home with me to the bungalow I was renting on the edge of town. For the benefit of subscribers, he'd written a quarter column on himself that gave no information but would fool the readers into thinking they knew all about him. Anything was a master of vague phrasing.

"Look here, Anything," I opened up on him as he began cooking the supper, at his own insistence. "You might fool the others with that story you wrote, but just what is the truth? All you said was that you'd come from somewhere, done something, were somebody, and meant to stay here as long as you felt like it."

He grinned and began dishing out the meal. "At least it wasn't a lie, Luke. You like catsup with your meat?"

"I take meat straight. Better try some yourself."

"Bread and milk's all that agrees with my stomach. Let's say I'm on a diet. How long you been running the Onion?"

"About eight years. Um, that's good!" Anything was more chef than cook, and I appreciated a meal that wasn't thrown together. "I've been trying to get on the regular papers in Chicago or Minneapolis, but there's not much hope. I'd have to quit here and take potluck in the city; they don't think much of small-town editors."

He finished his frugal meal and accepted a cigarette. "You're a pretty good man, Luke; maybe some paper'll take you on yet. In the meantime, you might do worse than the Onion. Thanks, I will take a piece of cheese, at that. You know, I think I'll like it here."

"Expect to stay long?"

"Maybe. It's sort of hard to say, the way things go. I had a pretty fair job on a farm upstate, but the farmer was Scotch."

I hoped for more information, but he gathered up the dishes and carried them out to the sink in silence, refusing my help. "Thanks, but I can do them faster alone. I suppose I can't blame people for suspecting me, at that. Anyone who works for room and board nowadays is supposed to be crazy; but I happen to have a dislike for money. The Scotchman got the idea I was a brownie."

The word should have meant something to me, but not very much. I was sure it had something to do with superstition, though; something about little

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men who went around doing things for people until somebody tried to pay them, or they were driven away.

"Sort of an elf?" I hazarded.

"Sort of; you might call them Scotch elves. They tended the cows or children, cleaned up the house of a woman who was sick, and made themselves useful in any way they could, though hardly anyone ever saw them work. Mostly they worked at nights, and all they wanted was a cranny in a barn where they could sleep and a bowl of food left for them once or twice a day. If anyone tried to force other payment on them, they had to leave."

"That doesn't sound like the sort of person a farmer should object to."

"Well, there's more to the superstition than that. It seems that they could do ill as well as good. Make the milk turn sour, cause a cow to go dry, and the like. Any time they were displeased, it was bad business. Sometimes the people got together and drove them away, and that was always the wrong thing to do. So when I come around dressed in brown and working for their wages, a few people got worried."

I could see where he'd worry some people, but more from curiosity than fear. "But the brownies, if I remember right, were supposed to be little short fellows. And I never read about their smoking or doing work in the newspaper line."

"Oh, I'm not suggesting I am one." He grinned with a hint of puckish amusement. "That sort of superstition has pretty well died out, anyway, and sensible people—like us—know there couldn't be such things. Still, if there were, I imagine they'd be modernized by now. They'd have to be more human looking to mix with men, and they'd have to adapt themselves to city life, perhaps. Of course, some of the old rules might still apply."

I wondered whether he was telling me all that in the hope of discouraging further questions, or whether he had some other purpose in mind: But that was his business. "Maybe they would change, if there were such things," I agreed. "How about staying here tonight? That cot of Thompson's won't be overly comfortable."

"It'll be all right. Anyhow, Thompson's putting me to work making general repairs tomorrow morning, so I'll be up early. See you in the afternoon, Luke."

As he disappeared toward the yard, I had a crazy idea that he'd do more than sleep during the night. Maybe it was what he'd been saying that caused it.

JIM THOMPSON came in the next morning with a smile that was so genuine it had to mean money for him. "That Anything's what I call a worker," he greeted me. "Does more work than any six men I ever had, and I don't have to stand watch over him, neither. Just goes off by himself and first thing I know, he's back asking for more."

"He's the best helper I ever had," I agreed. "How'd your wife like the article I ran on him in this week's paper?"

"Oh, fine, fine. 'Bout time you got it out, too. She says it's just what she wanted to know."

I'd had other compliments on the item, too. Anything had succeeded beautifully in telling everybody what they wanted to know without actually telling a thing; but I didn't explain that to Jim.

He drew some wrinkled sheets out of his pocket, covered with what he called writing, and I knew there was more advertising to be had from him. "Got a little job for you, Luke. Want you to run some handbills for me, like it says here."

"Which is—"

"When you ever gonna learn to read?" He snorted at that for the hundredth time. "O. K., just say I'm willing to contract for repairs around town to cost only the price of the lumber and hard-

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ware. I'll furnish the labor free for this week to anyone wanting work of that kind done. Town sorta needs a lot of repairs, I guess, and it's a good time for 'em."

When Jim offered free labor, it meant that it *was* free—especially to Jim. "You'll get the value of your cot out of Anything, won't you?" I asked.

I had to admit that Anything was a good worker. When I'd opened the office that morning, I'd found an envelope inside the door with half a dozen news items in it; as I'd guessed, Anything hadn't wasted the night. "Sam White's figuring on cutting in on it, too. He called up this morning wanting Anything to help with a couple of cars when we're not using him."

"Sam's a chiseler, always has been." He rounded up a scratch pad and eraser and pocketed them. "You make him fork over for Anything's board, or you'll be a fool. By the way, you hear about Olsen's sick horse?"

"No. The vet finally succeed in curing it?"

"Vet didn't have a thing to do with it, though he claims he done it all. Olsen woke up this morning and there the horse was, r'aring to go." Thompson filled his pipe and picked up a couple of red pencils. "You get the handbills out right away, Luke. I'm expecting to sell a smart bit of lumber this week."

Jim sold more than a smart bit. By the time the week was almost up, there wasn't a house in town that didn't have some of Anything's work in it, and several houses were practically made over. Where he found time for the work, was a mystery that puzzled everyone except Thompson.

Anything worked when people were away from home, and there were rumors that he had a staff of assistants, but no

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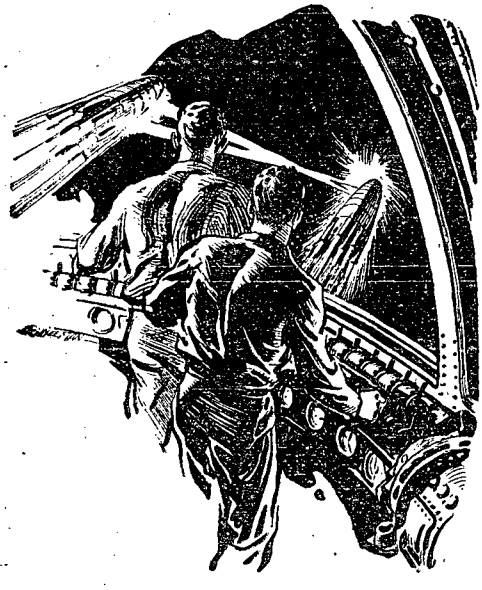

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one ever saw them. Molly Thompson had started that idea and the rumor that Anything was a millionaire come to town to rebuild it secretly; somebody else added that he was planning on opening a factory there, which explained his interest in Carlsburg. There were other contradictory rumors, too, but that was the normal course of events in the town.

All I knew was that Anything could do more newspaper work in part of an afternoon than any other man could turn out in a week, and better work, at that. If he stayed in town long enough, paid subscriptions should be doubled at the end of the year. Sam White felt the same about his garage business.

AND THEN the Carlsburg Culture Club held its monthly meeting, and the rumors that had been drifting around were focused in one small group. As a clearing house for scandal, the Culture Club acted with an efficiency that approached absolute. But since it was purely for women, I had to wait for the results of the meeting until the sound and fury were over and Moly Thompson brought in the minutes for publication.

She usually came in about nine in the morning, but this time she was late. It was nearly ten when Anything opened the door and walked in, and I was still waiting.

"Good morning, Luke," he said. "Is that bed over at your place still open to me?"

I nodded. "Sure is, Anything. What's the matter with the cot and why aren't you working for Jim this morning?"

"Carlsburg Culture Club," he answered. But his grin was a little sour, and he sat back in the chair without offering to do anything around the place. "Molly'll be calling you up in a couple of minutes, I guess, and you'll hear all the dirt then. Got a cigarette, Luke?"

When Anything asked for something, it was news good for two-inch type, purple ink and all. I handed him the cigarette and reached over to answer the phone that was beginning to ring. "Carlsburg *Union Leader;* editor speaking."

Molly's shrill voice tapped in over the wire, syllables spilling all over each other. "Don't you 'editor' me, Luke Short; I know your voice. You want them minutes, or don't you?"

"Of course I do, Mrs. Thompson. People always want to know what happened at the Culture Club." Personally, I doubted whether ten people, club members excepted, cared enough to know they were printed; I'd always begrudged the ink that put them on paper.

"You ain't fooling me with that soft soap. But you do want our 'scriptions, don't you? There's over forty of us, and we can make a lot of other people stop 'scribing, too. You want our 'scriptions?"

The line was old; I usually heard it six times a year, and in eight years, the words hadn't changed. "Now, Mrs. Thompson, you know I want your subscriptions. What can I do for you this time?"

"Humph! Well, you better want 'em." She stopped for a dramatic pause and drew in her breath for a properly impressive explosion. "Then you get rid of that Anything, Luke Short! You hear me, you get him outta there today. You 'n' that husband of mine, mixing up with him like you had a bargain, just 'cause you're too stingy to hire honest workers. I'll tell you, I put a bug in Jim's ear, and he won't try *that* again. And that Anything—a-telling me he was a millionaire trying to build up the town! Humph!"

I tried to calm her down and be patient. "Now, Mrs. Thompson, I'm sure you'll remember he never said that. I knew, of course, that several rumors were going around, but I can assure you he was responsible for none of them."

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"Like fun he wasn't. Every member of the club heard a different story, and everyone of them heard it *personal* from him. They told me so themselves. Wasn't no two alike!" Which was undoubtedly true; rumors in Carlsburg always were heard "personal" from the person concerned, according to reports. "And look what he done!"

Anything had come over and had his ear within a few inches of the receiver—as near as his eardrums could stand. He was grinning. Molly Thompson went on with a truly religious zeal.

"Going around doing all that work. It don't fool *me*. He had a *purpose*, and you be sure it wasn't for nobody's good. Besides, look at Olsen's horse. And Turner's boy that got bit by a hyderfoby dog and never even felt it. And look at them gardens where nobody ever finds any weeds or quack grass any more. Fanny Forbes saw him working in her garden one night. He's up to everything funny that's going on in the town, doing free work just to fool you men into thinking he's your friend. It's a good thing us women keep our eyes open, or you'd all wake up with your throats cut some morning."

I remembered another stranger who'd come to town before and shut himself up in a house, hardly coming out. The Culture Club had decided he was a famous swindler and tried to instigate tar-and-feather proceedings. They almost succeeded, too, when it was learned he was a writer trying to fulfill a contract for a book. Everything that was mysterious was evil to the club.

But I still tried to keep the peace. "I can't see any wrong in what has been done. He merely told us he could do anything, and kept his word. Surely that's nothing against the man."

"Anything! I'd like to see a person who could do anything at all. If I couldn't name a hundred things nobody could do, I'd eat my shoes. And him saying he could do anything!"

"So far, he's done what he claimed, Mrs. Thompson, and I'm not firing him for that."

She choked on it, and then snickered in greasy nastiness. "I'll just show you whether he can do anything. If he'll do just what I want him to, you keep him and I'll not say another word. If he don't, you fire him. That a bet?"

Anything nodded, but I didn't like the sound of it. "Lord knows what she's got in mind," I warned him. He nodded again, emphatically, and there was little humor in his smile.

"It's a bet. You tell him what you want," I answered, handing Anything the phone.

She must have lowered her voice, because I couldn't hear what she said next. But Anything's smile grew sharp and pointed, and there was something on his face I'd never seen before, and didn't want to see again. His usual soft voice was low and crisp as he finally spoke into the instrument.

"As you wish, Mrs. Thompson. It's already done."

There was a sudden shriek over the phone, and he put the receiver back on its hook. "Come on, Luke," he said. "I'm afraid I got you into trouble that time, and I'm sorry about it. Let's go home and see what happens."

Well, the paper was all made up, ready to be turned out the next day, and there wasn't much left to do. During the week I'd learned to respect Anything's judgment, and I had a hunch that this was one of the times to follow his advice. In five minutes, the shop was closed, the curtains down, and we were heading back to my bungalow.

"You won't believe it, Luke, so don't ask questions," was all he would tell me. "She asked something she thought impossible, and I did it. Matter of fact, you ought to kick me out, and not be seen with me again."

That shriek over the telephone had suggested the same; but, hell, I liked the

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fellow. "I'll stick," I told him. "And when you get ready to talk, I'll listen. How about a little work in the garden this afternoon?"

WE DIDN'T do much work, and at Anything's suggestion, we made an early supper of it, leaving the dishes unwashed and sitting around smoking. He seemed to be waiting for something, or listening to something.

"You got any good friends in town, Luke?" he asked finally. "I mean, somebody you can really depend on in a pinch?"

"There's Sam White. He'd lend me his last clean shirt. And he's a pretty good friend of yours, if I'm not mistaken."

"He seemed pretty square. You and he were the only ones who treated me like a white man." Anything stood up and began pacing around uneasily, going out to the door and back. "Why doesn't that messenger come?"

"What messenger?"

"Special delivery letter for you. Don't ask me how I know, either." He was standing on the porch, staring down the street. "Ah, there he is now. Go out and sign for it, Luke."

"Special delivery for Lucian Short," the man said. He avoided my eyes, though I'd known him half my life, seized the signed book, and scurried back to the car. I grunted and went back inside.

The letter was short:

> Your letter, requesting a chance to work with us has come to my attention. At present, we are looking for a man to fill the position of City Editor, soon to be vacated. We have checked your references and examined your previous work, and believe you are particularly qualified for this position. Please report at once.

It was signed by the managing editor of the Chicago *Daily Blade*, a paper I'd been trying to get on for years; but I hadn't tried for the City Desk.

I grunted, holding it out for Anything's inspection. "Damn it, they don't hire men that way—not for jobs like that on a Chicago paper."

He chuckled. "It seems they did. Maybe that will solve the problem. You'll be leaving on the 7:10 bus, I reckon. Better answer the phone, Luke, while I pack up your things. It's been ringing a couple of minutes now."

With clumsy hands I stuffed the envelope into my pocket and made a dash for the phone, buzzing its head off. Sam White's voice answered.

"Luke, for the love of Pete, is Anything there?"

"He is."

"Well, get him out of town! Get out of town yourself until this blows over. You're mixed up with him, and they're crazy enough to do any fool thing."

"What's up?" I'd expected something, and the expectation had been growing all afternoon, but nothing that justified the frantic urge in Sam's voice.

"The town's gone gaga, Luke! Absolutely nuts! Molly Thompson, the two Elkridge sisters, the whole damned Culture Club and some besides, have been stirring up people since before noon. Nobody's in his right mind. They're talking about a lynching party!"

That *was* strong. "Lynching party? You're drunk, Sam. We haven't killed anybody."

"Worse than that. They've gone back to the Middle Ages, I'll swear they have. I don't know nor care how he did it, but Anything's gone too far for them. They're talking about witchcraft and his being either Satan or a substitute for him. I thought this was a civilized town, but it's not. They're all drunk on supersition and fear."

"Sam, in Heaven's name, slow down and make sense!" His words were jumbled together until I could hardly understand him. "What happened?"

Sam caught his breath and slowed down a little. "Seems Anything hexed

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Molly and the Elkridges. You know how fat they were? Well, they're the thinnest, scrawniest women in town now. Molly doesn't weigh over eighty pounds! You've got to leave town before they really get stirred up. You can still make it, but give them another hour and hell's gonna pop! Get out, Luke!"

So that was what the screech over the phone had meant. At heart, I knew, people hadn't changed much in the last thousand years, and I could imagine what was going on. "O. K., Sam, and thanks," I said, cutting off his expostulations. "I just got a job in Chicago, and I'm going there. *Daily Blade*."

Relief was heavy in his voice. "That's fine, Luke. I'll see you in Chicago. My brother has a garage there, and he wants me to join him. Just got a special delivery from him. After tonight, I don't want another thing to do with this crazy bunch. Make it as quick as you can."

"I'm leaving now." Anything had just come down with the bags. The furniture was furnished with the house, and I hadn't acquired much except a few books. "See you in Chicago."

The line went dead, and I grabbed for a bag. "We're leaving, Anything. Sam says the town's out for blood."

He nodded and shouldered the two heaviest bags. "I kind of thought that might happen. But when she asked me to make her thin, I couldn't resist the opportunity. Hope you're not mad?"

I wasn't. The whole thing struck me as funny—if we got out all right. The bus station, really only a covered platform, was on the other side of town, and I'd have to catch it to Winona and transfer to a Chicago train there. No train would pass through Carlsburg before ten o'clock. But the whole main street lay between my house and the bus stop.

WE WALKED along in silence. There were people ahead, crowded into little groups, talking in low voices with excited gestures. As they saw us coming, they drew back and dispersed quickly. For a half block on each side of us, the street was deserted, but they reformed their groups after we had passed. Watching them do that, I quickened my steps, but Anything pulled me back.

"Take it easy," he urged. "They haven't reached the boiling point, but they're pretty close to it. If we take our time, we'll make it, but let them think we're running from them, or afraid of them, and they'll be on us in a jiffy."

It made sense, and I calmed down, but cold shocks kept running up and down my backbone. Even the dogs around us seemed to slink along with their tails between their legs. When a whole town turns on a man in one day, it isn't the pleasantest thing in the world.

Anything grinned easily, and his voice was mocking. "Somehow, Luke, I don't think people will like living here much any more. The town seems sort of dingy and dinky, doesn't it?"

I hadn't noticed, but now I did. Up ahead, things still looked reasonably well-kept and attractive, but as we drew nearer, I noticed that the paint seemed dirty and about to scale off, the buildings seemed about to crumble in, and there was an air of gloom and sickness about the town. Behind us it was worse. There was no real difference that I could see, but the change was there. No, people weren't going to enjoy living in Carlsburg.

We came up to Sam White's garage, now closed for the night, but there seemed to be nothing wrong with the place. Anything nodded. "Cheerful here, isn't it? Well, each town has its own bright spots. And there's your office. Own any of the paper, Luke?"

I shook my head, and noticed the same desolation fall on the *Union Leader* office. Even the people on the street behind seemed different. Before, they had been ordinary pople, but now they looked older, more frustrated, like

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ghosts come back to haunt a place after its use was done. The dogs were howling dismally, and I could see none on the street now.

It was a relief to see the bus stop come into view, and then feel its platform under my feet. It lacked two minutes of being time for the bus, but topping a hill in the distance, I could make out the amber glow of its lights in the growing dusk.

I turned to Anything. 'Where are you going now?"

"Think I'll take that side road there, and head west this time." It might have been a week-end trip for all the emotion he showed.

"Better come with me; maybe we can get you a job on the *Blade*. You're too good a printer and newspaperman for small towns."

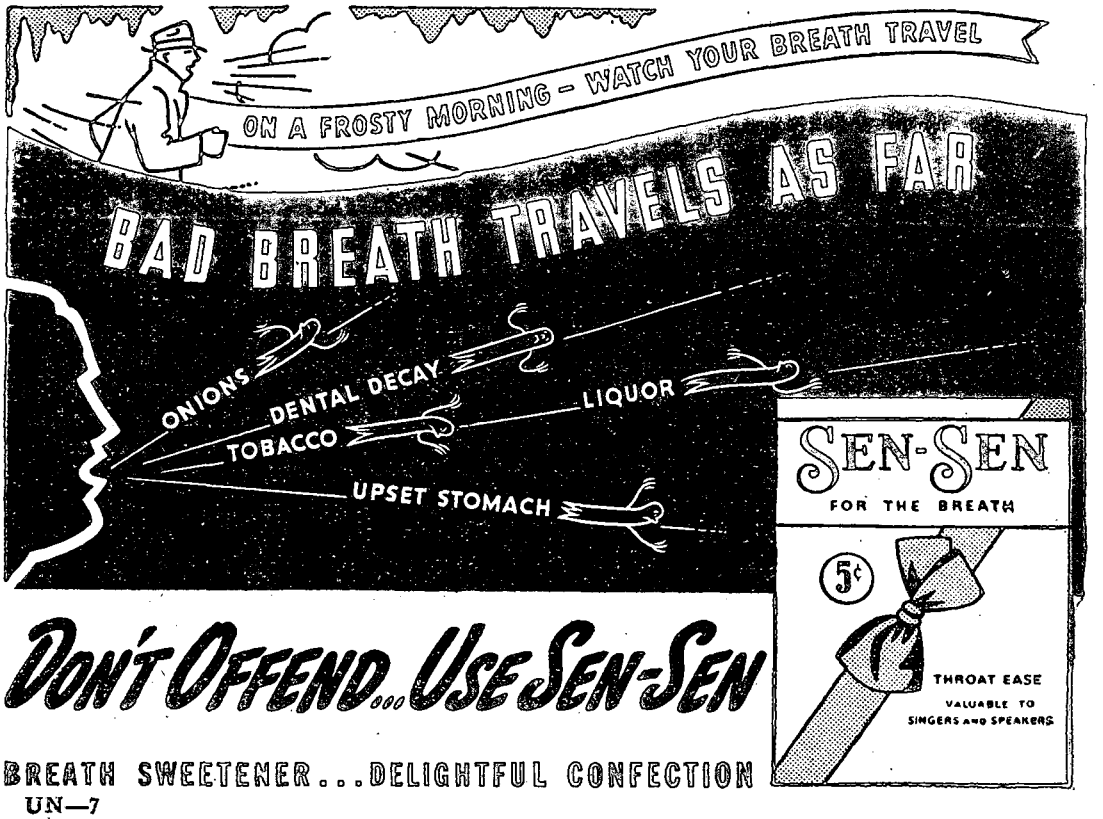
He grinned. "I'll be all right, Luke, but thanks for all you've done. Someday, maybe, I'll look you up in Chicago."

I nodded and glanced off toward the approaching bus. "So long, Anything, and good luck." Then the question that had been bothering me for a week finally came to my lips. "Just what kind of a man are you, anyway?"

But as I turned back to him, there was no need of an answer. Where he had been, a little brown man, stocky and with a large head, was walking down the road. His clothes were fashioned like something out of a child's storybook, and he carried a little bag on a pole over his shoulder. As I looked, he turned his head back, and there was a purring chuckle in his answer.

"A brownie. So long, Luke."

And then the bus pulled up and cut off my view of the best newspaperman that ever hexed a town.



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The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

Five-issue summary.

Dear Editor:

I have before me the five copies of Unknown which have appeared to date. I have just finished reading them—one after the other. I saved the earlier issues till now because I had no time to read till recently. Therefore, with no lapse of time between issues, I feel that I can evaluate and compare the issues more exactly.

Your best novel has been "The Ultimate Adventure." "Flame Winds" comes second and "Slaves of Sleep" third. Despite its ballyhoo, "Sinister Barrier" was not the classic you called it. It is fourth. After the first thirty pages it was a good story. Before that it was great. It could have been shorter.

"Returned from Hell" is a poor fifth. It's a disgrace to your magazine—the poorest story you've printed. The basic idea sounded intriguing, but it was ruined by sloppy handling and by sex. It lacked all semblance of plausibility. Please, Mr. Campbell—never again.

L. Ron Hubbard is great. But if the story "The Ghoul" next month is a novel he's being overworked. I could stand much more of Prester John or a similar character by Page.

Your best issue was either June or July. It's hard to choose. I hope you can continue to find so many good stories.

In looking over these five issues I have become convinced that your magazine is at its best in humorous stories—fairy tales, wish-fulfillment yarns like "The Hexer," et cetera. L. S. de Camp, H. W. Guernsey and H. L. Gold have shown great proficiency along this line. Hubbard also has the saving grace of humor.

About the best of the grim stories you've printed was Bloch's "The Cloak." "Divide and Rule" was a gem of delicious and often subtle humor and satire.

I say, don't bother too much about logical explanations—let your author's imagination have full sway. Stick to your formula of pure entertainment like "The Ultimate Adventure." For variety give us a sheer fantasy of the C. L. Moore and A. Merritt type and an occasional robust yarn like "Flame Winds." Make weird stories be exceptionally well written to find a place in your pages.

Now, for the July number: Best story—"Slaves of Sleep," of course. That Cartier is a splendid artist. Don't lose him. Ditto H. W. Scott. Orban's at his best for you, too.

"Nothing in the Rules" comes second—delightful nonsense. Then "The Elemental" and "The Joker" each of which seems to lack a slight "something." "Way Station" was good, but inferior to the others.

The foregoing all adds up to a decided liking for Unknown. Keep it up.—Donald **V.** Allgeier, Springfield, Missouri.

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Slave of "Slaves of Sleep"?

Dear Sir:

As a rule, I do not read the "dime story" magazines. When I was at the newsstand the other day I happened to be attracted by the cover of your Unknown magazine. I bought a copy and carried it home. That night I sat down to look through it. I started reading the story "Slaves of Sleep." It absolutely enthralled me. The next thing I knew it was 2 o'clock a. m. and I had nearly read my eyes out. "Slaves of Sleep" was stupendous, magnificent and entirely different. I was so disappointed when I had finished it that I couldn't sleep. If the rest of your stories are half as good as this one, you can bet I will be a steady reader of your magazine, and will subscribe at the end of the summer when I have a permanent address.

How about a sequel to "Slaves of Sleep"? —P. P. Phillips, Jr., 905 Dacian Avenue, Durham, North Carolina.

"What happened to the victor?"

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Your editorial in July Unknown reminded me of some notes I made not so long ago for my file of future stories.

"Right up to the latest mesozoic rocks we find these reptilian orders flourishing unchallenged. There is no hint of an enemy or a competitor to them in the relics we find of their world. Then the record is broken. We do not know how long a time the break represents; many pages may be missing here, pages that represent some great cataclysmic climactic change— When next we find traces —the pterodactyls are gone, so are the great magnitude of reptile species, dinosaurs, pleisosaurs: only the crocodiles and the turtles and the tortoises carry on—"

The quotation comes from Wells' Outline. It fitted in so well with your editorial that I could not resist calling it to your attention.

What happened to his earth-shaking majesty, Tyrannosaurus Rex? Did an ice age get him? Or did some other creature rise and challenge his supremacy? If so, what happened to the victor?—R. M. Williams, 6120 Greenwood, Chicago, Illinois.

How do you like Stein's cover?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Permit me to compliment you on what I and many others call the two top magazines in fantasy, *Astounding Science-Fiction* and Unknown. Having just read the April Unknown, I shall comment somewhat on the magazine.

The cover was nothing extraordinary. Try some other artists, please. I like the modernistic contents sheet. Very simple and easy to read.

"The Ultimate Adventure" was, perhaps, L. Ron Hubbard's most appealing yarn. I've read his work in *Argosy*, and various detective magazines, but he is splendid this time. I want to know how Stevie ever grew so much bone and muscle, though? What's the answer?

It seems that Burks has done some really readable writing. First the "Josh McNab" stories and now "The Changeling." I didn't care for the ending, though. It seemed forced and even more fantastic than the story itself.

The only criticism of "Death Time" is the extreme hackiness of the plot. E. Hoffman Price's "Strange Gateway" was very similar to other stories, but I doubt if I have ever read one with quite such a climax. Excellent! "You Thought Me Dead" was very readable. Give it a good mark in your little black book, Mr. Campbell.

The gem of the issue was, of course, "Divide and Rule!" I have enjoyed, very thoroughly, everything L. Sprague de Camp has ever written, and this one is really tops. It was so fascinating that I read most of it before I learned it was a serial. Generally I get most of the parts before I start in, but this time I had to go right along to the conclusion. I'm on pins and needles waiting for the next issue.—Louis Kuslam, Cosmic Tales, 170 Washington Avenue, West Haven, Connecticut.

DeCamp's working on another tale of anachronism.

Dear Editor:

So far I have only read three stories in this, the April issue, but on the whole the issue seems to be no better nor worse than the first issue. There was a greater balance of good stories, whereas the last issue had one stupendous story and its share of good ones.

The cover is certainly not unique, nor typical of Unknown. It is, indeed, the least fantasy-minded cover I have ever seen on a science-fiction or fantasy magazine.

The story itself, "The Ultimate Adventure," was superb, and quite delightful. I heard from the last issue—and the fan magazines—that the next issue of Unknown would have a story about "a man who could project himself into any story he read" and so I was quite surprised and pleased when the author worked out the "projection" so plausibly, that

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is, in the light of the story itself.

I can unhesitatingly say that "The Changeling" is the greatest story that Arthur J. Burks ever has written, and he will have to go a long time before he writes a better one. While the story was what the editor would have called "sheer fantasy," I find that it is that type of "fantasy" that is welcome anywhere.

The other story which I was delighted over was "Divide and Rule!" For some reason it appeals to my sense of humor, though I can't say why. The motto "Give 'Em the Works" is a gem. It really has another angle. All those phrases which we see on lodge emblems, such as "Ad Astra, Per Aspera," "E Pluribus Unum," "Nao Toon ky Nakke Tut," ad nauseum, probably sound just as silly and meaningless to the speakers of that language, as "Give 'Em the Works" would to an Englishman. Looking at it from a foreign mind, I presume that "Give 'Em the Works" looks as mysterious and powerful as "Wer zuerst kommt, mahlt zuerst." In the German language it is merely silly.

I look forward to more of this series.—T. Bruce Yerke, secretary Los Angeles Chapter, S. F. L., 1207½ N. Tamarind Avenue, Hollywood, California.

"Comments on Yoga."

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I see that my comments on Yoga got a reaction from a couple of your correspondents. I rather thought that might happen, but I didn't expect one of them to give the show away quite as completely as Mr. Hensley does by the statement: "The philosophy is based on the theory that all knowledge, and consequently all power, may be obtained by deep introspection."

Now, Mr. Hensley, people have been trying to obtain "all knowledge" by just that method for a long time—some thousands of years—and if anything is certain in this world it is that that method is utterly useless and discredited for the purpose in question. In science after science, men have tried for years to learn something by pure deduction—sorry, Mr. Campbell, you got "induction" and "deduction" transposed in your blurb—and have gotten precisely nowhere. Then other men have come along and attacked them with empirical, experimental, observational methods—looking at the external world and not at your own woozy mental states—and have gotten provable, checkable facts as a result.

Examples? Astronomy for one. The "wise men of India" in their infinite wisdom concluded that the world is parked on the back of an elephant, who stands on a tortoise, who stands on God knows what. Well, *is* it? Plato, another introspectionist, chided the observers of his time with the words: "The true astronomer should have no need of the starry heavens," and went on to explain that if they tried hard they could get the correct answers out of their own little minds without even going outdoors. And what did Plato contribute to astronomy? Nothing, of course. Only about a century ago the philosopher Hegel censured astronomers for looking for more than seven planets. He advised astronomers to forget their telescopes and study philosophy; if they did they'd know that there just *had* to be seven planets and no more, for assorted occult reasons. Unfortunately the planetoids Ceres and Pallas were discovered just about that time, and, of course, three major planets have been found since then.

Or take medicine. Books could be filled—and, I think, probably have been filled—with the screwy physiological and pathological theories evolved by introspecting philosophers out of their subconsciousness, before Leeuwenhoek—pronounced lay-v'n-hook—gave observers a tool with which to see what actually went on in human and other carcasses. But today we still find Mr. Ghandi, for instance, expressing his abhorrence of modern medicine and saying that it has probably caused more disease than it has cured. That from the "greatest" man in one of the most disease-ridden countries, and certainly the most mystical and introspective country, in the whole world! Gentlemen, how much more evidence do you want, anyway, of the utter worthlessness of pure introspection as a method of finding out what is and isn't?

Just a couple more points: Sure, exercise is exercise. But when I got dizzy from trying to lift a bar bell too many times, I didn't jump to the conclusion that my karma was about to have kittens. No, of course science hasn't explained everything. If the facts are infinite, it obviously takes an infinite time to explain everything by any method with a finite rate of operation. But every detailed, accurate, logical, precise, and *verifiable* explanation of any aspect of the nature of man and the universe that *has* been obtained has been gotten by the scientific method. Isentropic compression of a gas heats it: true? Sure; if you don't believe it try it. Sixteen male angels, or nineteen female ones, can dance on the point of a needle: true? There's no way of telling, because we don't know how to catch a herd of angels and make them perform in that silly manner.—L. Sprague de Camp, 44 East 63rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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BLUE AND SILVER BROCADE

By DOROTHY QUICK

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BLUE AND SILVER BROCADE

The tale of a patchwork quilt—a patchwork of bits from a hundred lives—

by DOROTHY QUICK

Illustrated by Kirchner

WHEN I had gone to bed the air had been cool and balmy, now it was actually cold. It was much too late to ask Aunt Amabel for another cover. An eiderdown was what I longed for, but even a thin blanket would help. Tomorrow I would get them both, but I couldn't disturb Aunt Amabel now. I had sat up for a long time—it was after one o'clock and Aunt Amabel was old and went to sleep at nine. Hester stayed in the room with her and the other servants were in a separate wing. I'd have to get through the night as best I could.

Just at that moment a gust of cold air swept in the window and snaked its way down my back. That made me determine that I must either do something about it or risk catching pneumonia. I sat up, lit the bedside lamp and pulled my woolly bathrobe around my shoulders. Then I leaped quickly out of bed and in another minute the window was down. At least no more icy blasts would come in, but I still needed something against the damp cool of a stone house on the Scotch moors.

I went to the closet where my tweed coat was hanging. To be sure, it would look like a fly on the surface of the great carved bed, but it was better than nothing. It wasn't until I was in the closet and saw the boxes piled on the top shelves that I had the idea perhaps one of them might contain the eiderdown I longed for. Aunt Amabel was a careful, old-fashioned housekeeper; she probably had extra covers in each room. I piled up my suitcase and stood on them to reach the high shelves and began searching through the boxes. I found everything from sealskin coats exuding camphor to a collection of hundreds of valentines, but not what I wanted.

I was about to give up when I saw one more box. I had almost missed it, as it was tucked behind the others. It was tied with strong twine which I had pulled off before I noticed that at the opposite end it had been sealed with red wax.

For a second I hesitated. It might contain some treasured heirloom of Aunt Amabel's. Still, having gone this far, I might as well complete the job. I lifted the lid and then breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction. My search had been rewarded—I had found a patchwork quilt.

I gathered it up out of the box, thankful that Aunt Amabel had put no camphor in it. As I took it in my arms I had the strangest feeling—as though something warm and alive was nestling against me. It was light and warm. Just holding it, seemed to shut out the dampness. Now, I thought, I would be able to go to sleep!

I hopped back into bed, shed the wrapper, and with a big fluff put the quilt over me. It was only then that I noticed its beauty. It was quite different from any patchwork quilt I had ever seen. To begin with, the patches were not the tiny bits of material such quilts are usually made of. These patches were quite large—big enough for my hand to rest upon and still be rimmed

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with the material of that particular patch. They were of all sorts of materials that seemed oddly at variance.

Here a gorgeous piece of blue-and-silver brocade, another of rich crimson that might have come from a cardinal's robe, and then a ragged patch of some woven stuff that looked very ancient. There was even one patch that seemed like parchment—dry and wrinkled—another of puce colored velvet, and next it a square of black wool cloth that seemed entirely out of place. They were joined together with raised embroidery in a kind of pattern that seemed to change as I looked at it. Like the runes on the Swedish swords, it appeared to be moving and trying to spell out words.

"I'm half asleep," I told myself, "and can't even see straight. Tomorrow I'll look more closely at the embroidery and examine the materials. They are so fascinating I'll never stop looking at them unless I turn out the light."

I leaned over to follow my own advice and as I did so, the blue brocade patch became clearer. I had never seen such beautiful stuff. The blue of a fringed gentian crisscrossed with silver lines making diamond-shaped patterns in the center of which were tiny figures.

I wanted to see what the figures represented but I was firm with myself and snapped off the light, cuddling down into my new luxury. I pulled the quilt up about my neck and held it there with my right hand. As I moved my fingers a little, I was aware that they rested on the piece of blue brocade. I could feel the crisscross intersections of silver. I remembered the figures and wondered idly what they would turn out to be. In the morning I would look, but now I was warm and comfortable and wanted nothing but to go to sleep.

THE SILVER was cold to my fingers. I moved them to find another patch and still felt the cool of the silver and no trace of the raised embroidery. I moved my hand farther—what should have been the length of two patches—and still touched only what I knew to be the blue brocade.

I looked down and was suddenly poignantly aware that I was not in bed. I was standing in the center of a room I had never seen before, and I was wearing a dress of blue brocade. Just like the patch in the quilt, it was crisscrossed with silver which made diamond shapes in the center of which were tiny silver crowns.

"I must be dreaming." I thought, and pinched myself. Then I knew it wasn't a dream, for my nails hurt my flesh and left a red mark.

Yet it must be a dream. I couldn't be in a paneled room hung with tapestries, dressed in strange clothes. But I was. There was no patchwork quilt, no four-poster bed, not one familiar thing.

Actually there was little furniture—a few high-backed chairs ornately carved, handsomely upholstered, several low footstools and an oaken chest—scrolled with a coat of arms on its top. Candles burned in sconces on the wall and one huge candlestick had a large candle in it and stood near a fireplace in which wood burned. I moved toward it conscious of the rustle of my full skirts. There was heat when I held out my hands to it. I wished I could see myself.

My figure certainly was different. I had a tiny wasplike waist from which the brocade billowed, held by huge hoops far out over my hips. The dress had a square neck, cut very low. There were puffed sleeves and a high lace collar. I had ropes of pearls about my neck, and I could feel that my hair was clustered in curls all over my head. I looked everywhere for a mirror but there was no sign of one.

What was I, and where was I? I

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knew that I was still Alice Strand in my mind, but certainly my body was different. To be sure I had a nice figure as Alice, but now it was altered. Alice had no wasplike waist, nor such voluptuous curves. Alice's hair was black and went into a soft roll about the neck. These curls were red gold—I pulled one down to see. I was Alice—but not Alice.

I thought of my famous prototype—and that perhaps I had strayed into Wonderland, too. But how strange that I knew nothing about the thoughts and life of the person I now was. Surely, if I had stepped back into time I should be wholly the person I had apparently become.

I began laughing at myself—this was all ridiculous. It was a dream. It must be a dream—or madness—and yet I wasn't mad.

There was an odd clicking noise and one of the tapestries was flung aside. From behind it came a woman—the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was dressed in the same style as myself only her dress was yellow—the rich vibrant color of new gold—and her curls were the same shade. Her eyes were so blue it seemed as though all the sapphires in the world were stored in their depths.

"Jeanne, you are laughing," she said reproachfully.

So my name was Jeanne! That was strange, but stranger still was to hear and feel a voice issuing from my lips—a voice musical and sweet, but totally unlike my own.

"Of a truth, how can I not laugh when I think of the folly that we do this night. Francoise, I swear that we are mad to go forth on this venture."

The woman in yellow was Francoise—but what was the venture? It was maddening to be a person and yet have no knowledge of her thoughts, her plans.

FRANCOISE sat in one of the high-backed chairs. She was majestic and her loveliness illumined the room more than the candles.

"Come here, child." She beckoned me to a footstool near her.

I—or Jeanne—settled my voluminous skirts and timidly laid my hand upon her knee.

"Madame, if we are discovered or your identity becomes known"—Jeanne shuddered and her fear became my fear. Her actions, knowledge, speech were her own, while I remained like a spectator seeing through alien eyes—but her emotions were my emotions. I shared her fear—only I did not know of what I was afraid and she did.

Francoise tapped her heavily-ringed fingers on the arm of the chair.

"I know, I know. People have been sent to their deaths for much less and yet—there are times, my Jeanne, that I think death might be preferable to life."

"Do not say that, madame."

"And why not? Do you think I care to be tolerated when I was loved? To be supplanted by one in my own service?" The great eyes were tragic. "To not know from day to day, what my fate will be? Truly, death might be preferable to life."

"So, madame, it may be with you, but with me it is not so, nor is it so with—Raoul." Jeanne's voice was low—aghast at her own temerity.

The ringed hand caressed my face.

"My Jeanne, a few months ago you would have welcomed death for my sake, but now you think of Raoul. Love is sweet—so, too, is life. Well, I cannot blame you. Stay here safe as a bird in a nest. I will send Raoul to you and he will be safe, too."

"But you, madame?"

"I"—Francoise took her hand away and her full lips curved enigmatically

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—"I, who am not afraid of death, or even of the *lady* who, it seems, is Death's vicar here on earth, will go—alone."

I caught her hand.

"No—no—madame! Truly I could not be other than at your side. If go you must, Raoul and I will go with you. I but tried to persuade you against this madness, but if you persist my place is at your side." Jeanne was still afraid. I, who strangely shared her body, knew this, but knew, too, that she had courage.

For answer Francoise began drawing the rings from her fingers. My own hands took the pearls away from her neck and then removing those I was wearing, I put them all into a secret drawer of the chest, the catch of which my fingers found so quickly that I knew they had often worked it before. From yet another secret place in the paneling I withdrew two long black capes with hoods. I say "I," but it was really Jeanne who did this, but being a part of Jeanne, it is easier to use the pronoun. Once the cloaks were adjusted we were two inconspicuous black figures. All trace of the blue-and-silver brocade was hidden—all of the glowing yellow. The hoods threw our faces into such deep shadow that even Francoise's beauty was lost in blackness.

For a second there was silence, then she said huskily, "It is time to go—and truly I am glad you are to be with me. Methinks I am a coward but this journey would be ill to make alone. Come." She held back the tapestry, pressed a part of the paneling and it slid back with the same clicking noise that had heralded her entrance.

She pressed me into a narrow passage almost completely black. I followed with a heart that beat too fast. The door swung shut behind us.

We were going somewhere—Francoise and Jeanne knew where. I, Alice, knew nothing except that I must go, too, and that Jeanne was afraid and her fears were mine.

We walked for what seemed like hours, guiding our course by clinging to the walls. Once I heard a sound like rushing water and Francoise sighed, "The stream *she* feeds with living men for fish flow fast."

Raoul! Suppose Raoul should be walking along a corridor and suddenly go hurtling down through blackness into the river's embrace instead of mine! That much of Jeanne's thoughts I could read, perhaps because they were so intense.

We went on in silence for what seemed an interminable time. Then once more Francoise pressed her hand against the wall and a door opened. There was a swift rush of cool night air and we stepped out into a courtyard. A man, wrapped as we were in a long black cloak, came out of the shadows.

"Madame!" He bowed low to Francoise but he caught Jeanne's hand in his and the thrill of his touch reached me through her consciousness.

"We are friends tonight, Raoul," Francoise said. "You know my name. Have you the guard's password for the night?"

He nodded. "It is 'For the king.'"

In the dim light I could see his face. He was very handsome—there was love in his eyes for Jeanne, admiration for Francoise. His voice was deep and resonant.

"We will have no difficulty," said Raoul. "I have let it be known I am going forth with two wenches from the scullery—begging your pardon."

Francoise smiled. "It is not the first time I have been called a wench—nor the last, I'll warrant. Keep your blue-and-silver brocade well covered, Jeanne. The *lady's* livery is too well known for a scullery girl."

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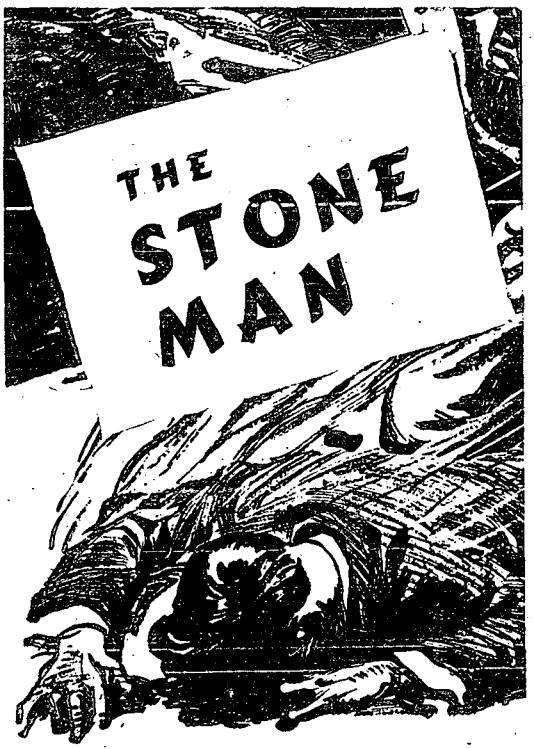

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"I abhor wearing it," Jeanne said. "My heart is yours."

Francoise touched Jeanne's hand. "I know. Lead on, Raoul."

SOME half an hour later we were alighting from a coach in front of a row of dark houses. There was no sign of a light in any of them, yet one was obviously our destination. On the ride in the coach, Raoul had tried his best to turn Francoise from her decision, but he had had no luck. Her mind was firm. As Alice, I was full of curiosity as to who Francoise was, who the *lady* was and what the object of our expedition! Jeanne's terror—which not even Raoul's presence had lightened—made me even more so.

Well, in a few more minutes I would know. We were climbing the steps of one of the houses. The coach had gone off to wait on the other side of the square some distance away. Raoul explained. As Francoise knocked four times on the carved door, Jeanne made the sign of the cross and muttered a little prayer.

A woman stood in the hallway holding one candle which gave just enough light to reveal her thin ratlike face.

"Your party is waited for," she mumbled through toothless gums, but her eyes were bright and alert.

Jeanne shivered and shrank back against Raoul, but Francoise entered without hesitancy. I could feel Jeanne's revulsion to the ratlike woman and the place, and through it all her love for Raoul and her fear for him, as well as herself, but I still knew nothing of the reason for the visit to this shabby house with its nasty occupant.

Raoul thrust his arm around me, and together we followed Francoise into the hall. The door slammed shut behind us and with it went a kind of hope that perhaps something would prevent this venture.

"Only God—or the devil—can help us now," Raoul whispered.

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Jeanne shuddered. The little ratlike woman smiled strangely, knowingly, at Francoise.

"All is ready—come—I will return for these others."

Francoise let back the hood of her cloak and her curls seemed like a ray of sunshine in the darkness.

"I will see you again. Fear nothing. After tonight the world will be mine once more."

Then she was gone—following the little woman down the long corridor—the candlelight throwing its feeble beam upon her exalted face. Presently it was dark—complete blackness—and I was aware that Jeanne's heart was beating faster as Raoul took her in his arms.

It seemed strange to feel strong arms holding a body that was not mine, in which for some reason, my spirit was imprisoned along with the girl Jeanne's, but I, Alice, felt the force of Raoul's lips and the thrill of his kisses and realized that for Jeanne no greater joy could be. In this moment she touched the heights and knew supreme happiness. I enjoyed it vicariously.

Far down the corridor the flickering light of the candle appeared again.

"Listen, Jeanne, whatever happens our loyalty is to her." He said the word reverently and I knew he meant Francoise. "If there is trouble, it is you I would want to save with every instinct of a heart which beats for you alone, but despite my love for you she must come first."

"I would not have it otherwise. It is so with me—yet I love you, Raoul." Jeanne was calmer now—ready to meet whatever came.

"As I do you."

One more kiss—then the little woman was back. Still smiling strangely, she led us down the corridor, through a door into another narrow hallway until we finally came to a room half filled with people dressed in black cloaks as we were with hoods, that overshadowed their faces. Our guide motioned us to seats and then glided off.

IT WAS a strange room, circular in shape, with a high ceiling like an inverted umbrella from the rafter ribs of which hung peculiar-looking objects. The walls were draped in black velvet and there was very little light—only two candles burning on either side of a white marble altar. It was completely bare, but at its foot directly in the center was a huge bronze bowl from which a thin cloud of incense floated, filling the air with a pungent odor which permeated everything. Without it one might have wondered what the room was for, but with it one knew immediately that here was evil—evil attended by horror and terror. Jeanne knew it, Raoul knew it and all the other people knew it, too. It was in their tense attitudes.

I looked everywhere for Francoise, but could see no figure that resembled hers. A faint rustle swung my eyes back to the altar, and there before it was a tall man dressed in white robes hideously spattered with blood.

Before I had time to recover from the shock of this, through two unseen openings in the black velvet slipped four other white-robed figures whose robes were also stained. One held a cushion on which lay something that gleamed wickedly in the candlelight, another held a censer with more of the malodorous incense, the third held a great bowl and the fourth an oddly shaped bundle that seemed to be moving, struggling to escape.

The tall man began to chant and an unseen chorus supplied melody that was evil in its beauty. And in that moment I understood why Jeanne had been afraid. It was the black mass—that terrible travesty of good—the worship of the lord of all evil—Satan himself.

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Revulsion—yes, and hatred of it filled me, but there was fascination in it. Just as a bird is charmed by a snake, so did the music—that unearthly, demoniac music—and the incense hold the people enthralled. I couldn't take my eyes away from the tall man or his blood-stained robes.

The incantation went on, the singing never ceasing no matter what the man did, and I found myself thinking that nothing mattered but that music. It swirled around me and went to my head as though it had been the strongest of wines. I knew that whatever it commanded I would do gladly, willingly—even though my whole soul revolted from it.

One of the figures threw a handful of powder into the big bowl in front of the altar. From it a screen of smoke arose that hid the altar, the priest and its attendants from our view.

Suddenly it cleared away and I saw the altar was no longer empty. On it, lying as though chiseled from marble, was the figure of a woman. There was no color anywhere in that alabaster skin—even the lips were pale—but back from the pale face swept a mane of golden hair that hung down over one end of the altar.

Even without that beautiful, vibrant hair I should have known it was Francoise from the classic profile, but I had had no idea of the wonderful figure the golden gown had hidden. She had all the perfect curves of a Greek statue. Indeed she might have been the statue of some ancient goddess of love carved on the top of a tomb as she lay there. Her eyes were closed, her breathing scarcely perceptible, yet I knew somehow, that she was alive and cognizant of all that happened. She had said "death was perferable to life"—was it death she had come here to seek? I wanted to cry out, to beg her to come away, but, entrapped as I was within another's body, I could do nothing. The suspense was maddening.

Jeanne at this moment spoke enlightening words.

"All this in search of more beauty when already she is perfect!"

Raoul heard the whispered words.

"To regain the affections of a king already besotted with love for the *lady*, she risks our lives and her own peace of mind. This is foolishness. It would take more than Satan himself to outwit the *lady*."

His sanity struck a different note. For a minute there was calmness—peace—and then the tall devil-priest turned to the attendant with the bundle in his arms, who knelt before the priest holding the bundle. The attendant with the cushion also knelt.

THE PRIEST leaned over so far that the backs of the kneeling attendants concealed from us what he was doing. Then suddenly he rose to his full height. In one hand he held a knife, cruelly sharp: in the other, curved into the hollow of his arm in a grim gesture of motherhood, was a large black cock struggling to free itself from the man's hold.

I knew this was only the beginning of the ritual and I grew sick with Jeanne's horror and my own. Raoul sat closer so I could lean against his shoulder. I needed the support for just as the cock crowed, the knife descended and the expression of pride ended in a sickening, choking gurgle as the blood spurted from its severed throat.

But greater horror was still to come for the priest held the still-moving body over Francoise and the blood poured down upon her. In a thin red line it ran down, down over the whiteness of her skin. I saw her wince and then faintness overcame me. The incense, the music, the chanting of the priest, Francoise's alabaster loveliness stained with

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blood merged into a swimming whirl through which I could distinguish nothing. I only knew the service was going on toward its evil end.

Then a loud knock shivered through my senses and brought everything back into distinctness. The little rat-faced woman ran in.

"The king's officers—they are breaking in the door. We are caught like rats in a trap!"

Rats! She was a rat—she should be caught! But not Francoise—no, not Francoise, no matter what she had done—nor Raoul—nor I.

Francoise's head was turned toward us, her eyes agonized.

Below we heard the door crash in—and the tramp of feet and clink of armor.

Raoul took command.

"There is no way out?"

The priest shook his head. "I die in the service of my master!" The light of the true fanatic gleamed in his face.

"And we!" echoed the sycophants.

"Then die silent!" cried Raoul.

Turning to Francoise, Raoul whispered. "Lie still and say nothing, if you value your life." He threw his cloak over her face, hiding it and the beautiful hair—leaving only her body uncovered.

He had hardly done so when the guards were in the room.

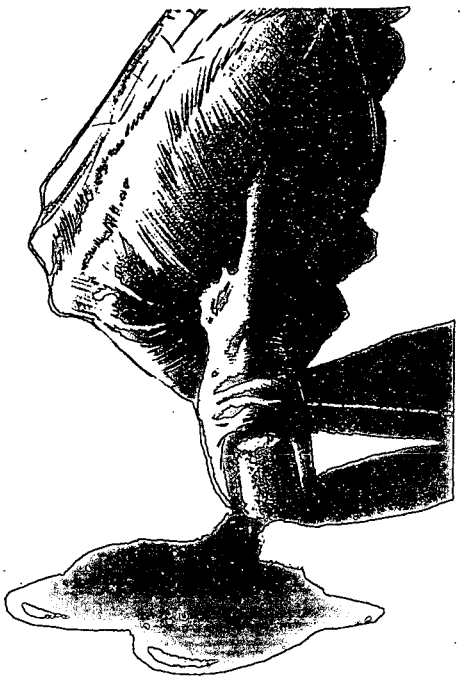
The priest plunged the gory knife into his own breast and fell beside the body of the cock he had killed. The four attendants drew knives from their robes and followed his example. The altar was a shambles.

The ratlike woman cowered in one corner, the worshipers still sat in their seats—only Raoul and Jeanne were erect and facing the guards.

The captain, seeing Raoul, gasped in surprise.

"My lord . . . you here!"

"Of a curious nature, I came to see what went on in this temple."



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THE SHADOW 10c
TWICE A MONTH

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"I must needs arrest you with these others." The captain was very plainly sorry.

"And so you must—but my friend"—he put his hand on Jeanne's shoulder—"could you not forget that she was here?"

The captain shook his head.

"The *lady's* orders were very strict, my lord. Everyone in this place was to be put under arrest."

Raoul held my cloak aside, revealing the blue-and-silver brocade.

"Even one who wears the *lady's* livery?"

"Even then, my lord."

Raoul sighed. "You said, 'Open in the name of the king,' but it seems you obey the *lady!*"

"Of a truth—she is the harder master. She demands good service. I am sorry, my lord. You must all come with us."

"And the dead—will you take the dead or leave a guard over them?"

I could sense the tension in Raoul's voice, but fortunately the captain did not. He strode over to the altar, the metal of his armor echoing through the room as he moved. He kicked the prostrate priest and the others. He bent over Francoise and for one awful minute we thought he was going to lift the cloak from her face, but he shuddered away from the altar and came back to us.

"My stomach can savor no more horrors. To see the bird and these dead men is bad enough, but to look at the cut throat of a woman so beautiful likes me not. No, my lord. I have few men. I need them to guard the living, not the dead. The dead cannot get away. When you are all safely bestowed, we will return and see to the dead.

"Come now."

He signaled his men who ringed us round—the company of worshipers, the ratlike woman, Raoul and Jeanne.

Raoul's hand was firm on mine. I heard him sigh with relief as we were marched out of the room. Francoise was safe. With no guard she could make her escape and get back to the palace.

THIS MUCH of Jeanne's thoughts were mine and I could piece out the story, too, from what Jeanne and Raoul had said. I was glad Raoul had told Francoise the password. No matter what happened to us—Francoise was safe. To Jeanne that seemed to matter most.

When the captain locked the door of the house and thrust the key through his belt, I had no fears for Francoise. There were windows through which she could climb to safety. The coach still waited on the other side of the square. She was safe—*safe*—SAFE!

The words kept repeating themselves in Jeanne's thoughts until finally she stood alone in a small room with Raoul—a second's grace granted them by the captain.

"This is good-by," Raoul said slowly after a long and lingering kiss.

"Good-by," Jeanne echoed.

"When they go back and find she is gone, they will begin to interrogate us all. No one but you and I know who she is. Can you bear torture for her sake?"

Jeanne's voice faltered.

"I hope so."

"The *lady* will stop at nothing to unearth the truth. She evidently thought she had 'her' trapped tonight and the *lady* will be like an angry snake lashing its tail to find a way to strike at 'her.' Jeanne, you must never breathe 'her' name."

"I would not willingly, but Raoul, I am not strong like you. I am afraid of the rack and the things it will wring from me. Yet I would rather die than

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betray 'her.' Kill me, Raoul, so I cannot speak. Kill me now, and then join me quickly—"

She had courage—this Jeanne. Even though it meant my own annihilation, I was proud of her spirit.

Raoul sighed. "I have no weapons. They took them all—else I would gladly spare your body torture, knowing soon I would come to join you in eternity, my love."

"You have your hands. Let me die with your hands about my throat—your lips on mine."

His eyes became great wells of understanding pity.

"So be it. We will cheat the *lady* and Madame de Montespon will triumph yet," he whispered and, bending over, placed his lips on Jeanne's, locked his hands about her throat. "Forgive me—there is little time."

His hands pressed firmly. For a minute the rapture of his kiss mingled with the pain of the pressure of his hands, then the pain became a quick, biting agony—so intense as to be unbearable. Jeannie gasped, tried to breathe, tried to beg him to stop, but the pressure was inexorable.

Jeanne was dying—and I, Alice—what would happen to me? When she died, would I be thrown bodyless into Limbo, or would I die, too? And what use Jeanne's dying? Since Raoul had mentioned Francoise's name I had remembered history—Francoise, Marquise de Montespon! She had staked all upon one throw—and she had lost. The black mass had not brought King Louis back to her. It had not allowed her to triumph over the *lady*. Instead, the *lady*—Madame de Maintenon had triumphed over her! For the rat-face woman had talked. And De Montespon had been sent away from court—to a convent, as I remembered.

So Jeanne was dying in vain.

I tried to communicate my knowledge to Jeanne, but I was helpless There was a final gasp through that tortured throat then a great blackness, and I knew no more.

FROM far away I heard Aunt Amabel's voice calling, "Alice, Alice, what is it?"

I tried to answer but my throat was constricted. I couldn't make words come. I sat up in bed reaching instinctively for the light. As I turned it on the quilt slipped to the floor and Aunt Amabel, supported by Hester, came into the room.

It was Hester who grew suddenly white and pointed to the quilt.

"It's the quilt, ma'am—the patchwork quilt!"

I was back in the four-poster bed surrounded with people I knew, familiar things. I was Alice—there was no Jeanne. I had been dreaming—and yet it had not seemed like a dream.

"I must have had a nightmare," I said slowly.

"No," Aunt Amabel shook her head, "you went to sleep with the quilt over you. Do you remember which patch your hand was on?"

"Yes, of course—blue-and-silver brocade—there were tiny figures, too—crowns—" No, that was wrong. I hadn't known last night what the figures were. I had meant to look in the morning and I had dreamed—I looked down and my eyes went wide. *The figures were crowns!*

"The quilt should have been burned long ago." Hester regarded it with loathing. Aunt Amabel sank into a chair.

"Hester is right—but I've never been able to bring myself to destroy it. It would be like killing a living thing."

I remembered the feeling I had had when I first took it in my arms. "Tell me about it," I begged.

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"The quilt was made by an old witch woman centuries ago. Each patch has some horrible and weird happening connected with it. She collected them all in odd and strange ways and wove them together with her magic spells. She liked to relive the lives of others and savor the unnatural. If you go to sleep with your hand on a patch, it takes you back into time. Each patch has a different experience." For an instant Aunt Amabel's voice faltered, then she took up the tale.

"The quilt came into the possession of one of my husband's ancestors. He had a perverted sense of humor and put it on his guest-room bed. The stories his guests told of their nightmares amused him. It was a great jest until one man went mad after going to sleep with his hand on one of the patches. Then the quilt was put away. It became a family heirloom, mentioned in hushed voices.

"When I was first married, my husband showed it to me. I was full of curiosity. I slept with it two nights, then I could stand no more, so I sealed it away. They say such things can't be, but undoubtedly, there is something strange about the quilt and the adventures it provokes. Call them dreams if you don't believe the witch's power, but the effect of the quilt cannot be denied. I suppose I must destroy it now." There was regret in my aunt's voice.

"No," I said firmly. "I want to sleep with it again!"

"You must not, child"—Aunt Amabel raised a shaking hand. "Didn't I tell you one man went mad?"

I hesitated—torn between curiosity and a reluctance to admit, even after my recent experience, that there could be danger in a few pieces of silk sewn together. For a minute my sense of caution balanced the fascination of the unknown, but then I glanced down at the patch that looked like shriveled parchment. I wanted desperately to know where that patch would take me—into what part of time. Parchment? Why, it might even be human skin! I would have to find out.

"I must try again," I told my aunt.

"You are very brave," she said slowly.

"You are a fool." Hester grunted. "One woman who slept under that quilt was dead the next morning. No one knows what patch she chose. Suppose you selected the same one!"

"Please, Alice, let us put the quilt away." Aunt Amabel's old eyes were pleading.

But I shook my head. Madness—death—it could be, but I wouldn't believe it. I must deny its existence, because no matter what awaited me, I had to find out if the shriveled patch was parchment or human skin. I had to find out—

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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THE ENCHANTED WEEK END

By JOHN MacCORMAC

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THE ENCHANTED WEEK END

Unquestionably Merlin's magic still was potent—but it lacked, somewhat, in discretion.

by JOHN MacCORMAC

Illustrated by Gilmore

TO THE LODGE gates of Castle Enniscrow was four hours by train from London and another half hour by motor. From gate to castle was five more minutes. That was a long journey in England, but James Fielden did not begrudge it when a winding drive finally burst into open parkland and Enniscrow became visible among its lawns and flower beds. There was a Celtic darkness over all this land of Cornwall, in the hair and eyes and complexions of its people. The trees of Enniscrow Wood were clad in a danker, lusher foliage, and their trunks and limbs looked old and twisted. A place for dryads—or Druids. With the September sun setting behind it Castle Enniscrow—its older wing at any rate—looked ancient and enchanted, its walls clothed and its windows veiled by blue-green ivy. A place for dreams and spells.

It was dreams, but not spells, that brought the purely American James Fielden to the old, and purely English, castle. Fielden had dreams of proving that the English didn't know where their own King Arthur had ruled; Fielden believed he had ruled in Cornwall rather than in Wales, as the English insisted. Castle Enniscrow should have some old records, and might—if legend served—have records of Arthur and Merlin.

It had taken a bit of wangling. James Fielden himself might not have accomplished it; he was a scholar, and known to and among scholars. Castle Enniscrow was not acquainted with scholars—they went in more for sporting names here. But James Fielden's polo-playing brother was a different matter; a letter of introduction from him carried weight and authority with the friends of the Enniscrows—if it did, perhaps, carry a bit of a wrong impression. James Fielden did not play polo; he did not play in fact. Sports were a field of activity that did not interest him, because he was, and always had been, unquestionably bad at anything in the line.

Old manuscripts, though, and libraries—

His eye followed the heavy, lichen-crusted old stones of Castle Enniscrow's early wing. The great buttresses and narrow windows had been built for purposes other than containing a collection of manuscripts, though this, he understood, was the present function.

But it was at a porticoed entrance gate in the newer wing that James Fielden was deposited. It wasn't ancient nor dreamlike. Although his bedroom, he thought when a footman showed him up to it, was not a bad place for a nightmare. It was not the fault of the room—which, if overlarge, was well proportioned—but of the decorations. There was a tasteful congeries of bows, arrows, assegais, knives and axes. There was also a collection of animal heads which James was ready to believe were remarkable specimens of their kind, but seemed somewhat out of place in a bedroom. Particularly the head of a huge and revolting warthog which, with singular dis-

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regard for esthetic standards, had been given a place of honor where it could not escape the regard of the innocent spectator, nor he its glassy stare.

The havoc wrought on James was so obvious that the footman felt explanation was necessary.

"Belonged to General Enniscrow, Sir Bertram's uncle and a famous big game hunter, the room did, sir. The general had to keep his room in his old age, and liked to have his victims where he could see them, as you might say."

Feeling that if he stayed long enough the general might posthumously bag one more victim, James hurriedly bathed and dressed and escaped downstairs, reflecting that the Enniscrows must be made of pretty stern stuff. There was, he immediately noticed, a look of hard fitness about most of their guests. But Lady Enniscrow proved to be the motherly, if slightly weather-beaten, type of hostess, and all apologies.

"Mr. Fielden, isn't it? Of course we've all heard about your brother. So sorry we had to put you in the museum—you're not a big game hunter yourself by any good luck? No?—but we have a house party for the hunting—it begins on Monday, you known—and it was the only decent-sized room we had left. If it hadn't been for a tiresome bazaar in the village I would have been on hand to break the blow for you. As for Bertie, well, you see they've made him master of the Bottesmore, so naturally he lives at the kennels all day and at seven comes back and howls for his food."

Sir Bertram came up. He was tall and rawboned. The nostrils of his long, straight nose quivered slightly when he talked. He had been descanting on the proper care and education of foxhounds to a reverent audience of spinsters with that sandy, windburned look that marks the skirted young of the English county family. At his wife's remark he parted his large and curiously stony teeth in a smile.

"Better than growling after it, what?" he whickered, a witticism greeted by a whinny of appreciation from the outdoor maidens.

"It is my duty to warn you, Mr. Fielden," said Lady Enniscrow gravely, "that if you are going to hunt with the Bottesmore, you must learn to laugh at my husband's jokes. Laugh and the hunt laughs with you is his rule."

"I would make a point of laughing until I fell off my horse," said James politely, "only I shan't be hunting with the Bottesmore."

"I say—a polo player and not going to hunt?" said Sir Bertram incredulously.

"It's my brother who plays polo. And didn't Mr. Holme explain? About how I wanted to do research work in that celebrated library of yours?"

"Nunny's incoherent enough when he's talking to you," said Lady Enniscrow. "When he writes, you throw up your hands. Something about polo, I remember, and about those old manuscripts the British Museum wanted Bertie's father to give them. And then there was some nonsense about King Arthur."

"I hope it isn't nonsense," said James, "because that's why I'm here. It will be terribly boring for you, and it's extremely good of you to have me—"

BUT OTHER guests had drifted up and Lady Eleanor began those casual English introductions that enable a country house party to discuss sport, politics and the weather from Friday to Monday, and to forget each other, if need be, forever afterward.

"Lady Needbore, Mrs. Curvett, Mr. Harold Anthony—Mr. Anthony is in the Foreign Office—Captain Thruster, Lady Clatter—she doesn't hear very well—my daughter Niniane—"

But James Fielden heard no names after that and forgot all those which had

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gone before. Was it not Niniane, a king's daughter—or as some accounts had it, a water fairy—who had beguiled from the mighty Merlin the secret of his magic and imprisoned Arthur's bard and soothsayer for all time living in a rocky tomb? To hear the name seemed a good omen for his quest. But it was not his quest that was uppermost in James Fielden's mind.

An impenetrable shyness had divided him from girls in his youth. In its adult guise of superiority it had continued to hold women at arm's length. He had never been inoculated against femininity and could not now withstand a massive dose. Not that he would have admitted the metaphor in connection with the Lady Niniane. Though in her evening slippers, she was almost as tall as James Fielden, and produced an effect of such latent vitality as to make that young scholar feel suddenly anæmic, her long-limbed figure with its melting curves was to become now and forever his standard in these delicate matters. Nor was there anything sandy about her, nor windblown. She was all gold, that warm and glowing gold of the positive blonde. There were golden glints in the depths of her green eyes, as of hidden treasure, Mr. Fielden thought. But this may have been because he gazed so long and deeply into them. They were certainly merry and mocking depths, discouraging to springboard technique, had he possessed any.

II.

BUT MR. FIELDEN possessed none. The waters of fate, he felt, had closed over his head for the first and last time. They were still roaring faintly in his ears as he went in to dinner. He found himself at his hostess' left. Across the narrow table, but one place farther removed, sat her daughter, her pearly shoulders reflected by its four-hundred-year-old patina. On Lady Enniscrow's right, beside Lady Niniane and making the most of his advantage, was a dark, smoothly handsome young man of consciously athletic appearance. He looked, unathletic Mr. Fielden thought, like the self-confessed hope of his side. And that, it turned out, was just what he was.

"It was really charming of you to come, Mr. Brawne," Lady Enniscrow was saying, "when England has that match on next week in Paris. Shouldn't you be practicing or something?"

"Dear lady, I should indeed. But there are things more important even than humbling the proud Gaul," said this highly mannered young man in a tone rich with gallantry. Lady Enniscrow, a practiced hostess, recognized her cue.

"Patriotism isn't enough then? But what things? Could the middle-aged mother of children be expected to know them?"

But Niniane broke in swiftly to interrupt the tender confidence so obviously on its way.

"Why, of course, mother, can't you see? Gerald means that what is more important than beating the French just now is not to beat them. Didn't I read that they were worried about the *entente cordiale*, or are trying to keep up public confidence in the franc, or something? And, of course, the Foreign Office wouldn't like Gerald to make them feel any worse."

"I have often heard," said James, "that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. But I had no idea Downing Street obtained its victories on the tennis courts of Wimbledon."

"Why, of course. It's practically become a branch of the Foreign Office, only the examinations are different. Of course, when Gerald tours the empire they second him to the Dominions Office, and when he plays at home he's under the Home Office. They did that," she explained gravely

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to James, "because last year he almost let the public-parks champion beat him and the *Daily Mail* said it was an encouragement to communism. So you see," she concluded, "that's what Gerald means when he says there are things more important than beating the French."

"Point, game and set," acknowledged young Mr. Brawne. "To love—" he added forgivingly.

"You see, he's only been playing a game with me," said his tormentor pathetically. "Watch him twist his mustachios and sneer. A maiden's curse on you, sir." While Mr. Brawne giggled ecstatically, she turned her disturbing eyes on James Fielden. "Perhaps Mr. Fielden can give you some practice, Gerald. You play tennis, of course, Mr. Fielden?"

"I'm afraid I'm not much good at games," James apologized.

"Games! He thinks tennis is only a game," she marveled. "Don't go on, Mr. Fielden. Gerald is a little young yet to hear the facts of life."

"But I thought," said Mrs. Curvett, "you Americans took your sports so seriously."

"Games, perhaps," said James. "But if you want to know which race takes its sports seriously, come up to my bedroom."

The Lady Niniane giggled. "He's not trying to be ribald, Mrs. Curvett. It's just that we had to put him in the museum."

"Ah, yes, the general's room. It is a bit grim," said Mrs. Curvett. "But surely you hunt, Mr. Fielden?"

"I know what you mean," said James. "You mean, do I hunt foxes? The last time I did that was fifteen years ago on my uncle's farm in Virginia. I used to shoot them with a .22."

"You used to shoot them!" said Niniane, with a shock not entirely simulated, as Lady Enniscrow gasped and Mr. Brawne looked startled. "I wonder what our husband and father, the M. F. H., would think of that!"

"Would Sir Bertram not like it?" asked James.

HIS DISCLOSURE had temporarily paralyzed conversation at their end of the table. In the lull Sir Bertram had heard his name mentioned.

"Eh, what's that?" he asked.

"Don't tell him," whispered Niniane, but James could see no reason to take the admonition seriously.

"Your daughter asked me if I liked fox hunting, and I merely remarked that I used to shoot them. That's all," he said.

"Shoot foxes, did you say? Shoot foxes! Good God!" was all Sir Bertram could find to say. But the veins swelled alarmingly on his forehead. He lifted his glass and then set it down again without drinking. "Shoot fo—" He took up his glass once more and drained it at a gulp. A murmur of horror ran around the table.

Lady Clatter, interrupted in the full flight of some highly audible confidences about a recent operation, asked "What's that? What's that?" This good lady had so long lifted her eyebrows over the way the world was going that they had permanently retreated into the region of eternal snows. When informed by an embarrassed neighbor of James' wrongdoing she remarked "What a barbarian!" in a tone heard around the whole table.

James attempted a light laugh, but it was an unconvincing effort. "Oh, I suppose it seems a little unusual to you here," he remarked in a tone meant to be mollifying. "As a matter of fact, we ride to hounds in America too. My brother is quite good at it. I was only a youngster, of course. But does it matter very much?"

General Scarrett broke in. He had been swelling so visibly during James' explanation that it was obvious that either he or his feelings must explode. It

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had been the general's boast that he had had hundreds of men shot under him, but never a horse. Only second to his conviction that the only way to fight a war was on horseback was his belief that it was the only way to hunt a fox.

"Matter, sir? Of course it matters," said General Scarrett. "It's not sporting to shoot a fox. It's simply not done, sir. I would as soon shoot my grandmother." His voice failed him. Indignation seemed to be registered in every eye but Niniane's. In hers there was a look of light mockery.

James Fielden felt half amused, half nettled, at the seriousness with which these privileged adult children of an old and mighty race regarded a matter of so little importance. He became judicial, indulgent, a little professional.

"I never met your grandmother, of course," he said to General Scarrett, "but I'm sure you do her an injustice. I used to shoot foxes. You hunt them with horses and dogs. You've got to kill your foxes in a certain way or it's not kosher, as the Jews would say."

"Jews? Kosher?" snorted Sir Bertram. "Young man, do you know that you are talking about the most English thing in England? What, if I may ask, have the Jews to do with fox hunting? Stuff and nonsense."

"Probably," agreed James soothingly. "Of course, I know fox hunting isn't really a matter of religion with you. It's a matter of taste. I shoot foxes. You hunt them on horseback and let dogs kill them for you. For that matter, take the horses and dogs. You keep them as pets. But the Chinese, who are a much older race, eat dogs, and the French, who are more cultured, eat horses. Again, a difference of taste. Or take yourselves. Fifteen hundred years ago you English used to stain yourselves blue. Now you like to lie out on some beach and burn yourselves red. Taste again."

SIR BERTRAM'S countenance, as James finished this little homily, appeared to indicate that he had been lying out on some very hot beach indeed. Lady Enniscrow, gauging her spouse's blood pressure with a practiced eye, thought it time to intervene.

"Talking about tastes, perhaps you like golf, Mr. Fielden," she said hurriedly. "You Americans are so wonderful at golf, aren't you? We have a very good course near here, really a championship course, and we could drive you over tomorrow—"

"I'm sorry, Lady Enniscrow," said James, "but I am no golfer. I am saving it for my next incarnation."

"It's my guess next," said Lady Niniane, "perhaps Mr. Fielden is just a trout fisher out of season."

"No," replied James. "It may sound over-squeamish, but not for many years have I been able to relish the thought of sticking a barbed hook lengthwise through a worm."

"A worm?" said Mr. Brawne. "I'm not a fisherman myself, but, good Heavens, a worm!"

"Don't tell father, Mr. Fielden," pleaded Niniane. "I think he's had enough."

"As a sportsman," said Mr. Brawne, falling into line, "I fear your methods would be too coldly logical for him."

"I don't claim to be a sportsman," said James stiffly.

"But if you're not a sportsman, and you don't play games—" said Mr. Brawne helplessly. "I mean to say, how do you keep fit, to put it on the lowest ground?"

"I drink a pint of hot water every morning," said James seriously. "Then I lie on my right side and practice Yoga."

"Very interesting, I'm sure," said Mr. Brawne coldly, "but I was referring to sport, not religion."

"Well, you see," James explained brightly, "some people make a religion

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of sport, so I decided to make a sport of religion."

"But I thought," interposed Lady Enniscrow hurriedly, "that one practiced Yoga in a sitting position."

"I tried that," said James, "but I could never get up afterward."

Mr. Brawne's snort at this confession of weakness was no more disapproving than the cold silence maintained by all others who had heard it. During the remainder of the meal and the rest of the evening James was permitted to feel like an outsider who had somehow got his foot across the doorstep. He felt exasperated, discomfited and regretful when he ascended to his room. Exasperated that—what was Bernard Shaw's name for it?—Horsebadk Hall should take its little games so seriously. So did his brother, perhaps, but he wouldn't mind your joking about it. Discomfited because he was depending on these people for hospitality and he seemed to have offended them. Regretful because the first woman on whom he had ever desired to make an impression was obviously the last on whom he could hope to do so. No one, he supposed, who couldn't sit a horse or pursue a ball or a fox could hope to cut an impressive figure in the eyes of a girl so adept at all of these things.

HE HADN'T wasted his time; he had been too busy doing something more important to learn how to chase balls or beasts. He had even acquired distinction in his chosen field, but it obviously counted for less than nothing here. "Perhaps I should have been a warthog hunter," he growled. The repulsive specimen of the genus on the wall, grinning evilly in the flickering light cast by a pleasant open fire, so exasperated him that he tried to throw a bedspread over its evil face.

"Missed, of course," he said peevishly as he retrieved the bedspread from the fireplace. Well, after all, he had not come to Enniscrow Castle to waste his time and affections on someone who, however desirable, was obviously not of his kind, nor he of hers. Tomorrow he would set to work, the work that he could do so well, that was so much more thrilling and important than all this killing of time and animals.

Awakening in this same mood of determination, he thumbed his nose at the warthog, dressed briskly and was fortunate enough to find Lady Enniscrow alone in the breakfast room and to explain to her what he wanted. The library, it seemed, was in the old west wing of the castle. It was catalogued except for the oldest portion, of which the catalogue was lost. Bertie would have been quite willing to give the museum what the museum wanted from it, but his grandfather, who, it seemed, hated all governments, had made it part of the entail. There was also, she added with a laugh, supposed to be a curse or a secret or something in connection with the library. But it had not prevented experts from looking over it from time to time and she thought that they must have noted everything of value.

James Fielden's soul sank within him. He had hoped this would prove virgin material. But there was always the chance, he thought, as he followed a footman down echoing corridors to the west wing, that those who had been before him might have missed something.

That seemed more likely when they reached the library, a huge, circular room, with stone walls and pointed, vaulted wooden ceiling, that was really a separate wing in itself. The cathedral light admitted by its high and narrow windows left in darkness five deep bays or recesses which, James Fielden remembered, found their counterpart in the flying buttresses which sustained the library without. And everywhere there were books. The older ones, his guide informed him, were to be found in the

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Fielden found his concentration on the old tomes tending to wander. Perhaps, after all, a bit of ability at those sports would be a good thing—

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recesses and there, too, were many manuscripts in tin boxes to protect them from the damp that seeped, even through those solid, four-foot walls, from the clustering ivy outside.

The footman bowed and left him. James Fielden got to work. There were five recesses. Where a sixth one might have been expected, there was, surprisingly, what seemed like a huge stone, roughly oblong, its front adorned by a statue carved in three-quarter relief. The figure might have been that of a Welsh bard, was at any rate that of an old man in flowing garments with long hair and beard. The attitude was curious. The left hand veiled the downcast eyes as though their owner were lost in a dream. The right was flung high as though in warning to him who should seek to disturb that slumber. The chiseling was rough but powerful. The statue and the tomblike stone seemed to be more ancient even than the library itself, which, Lady Enniscrow had said, was reputed once to have been a chapel and was older than the Norman Conquest.

HERE, James thought, was to be found the origin of the "curse or secret or something" with which legend had haunted the library. But it was not the riddle he had come to solve. He began methodically to examine the contents of the first recess.

Hours later he was roused, with a start, from his researches. It was his friend, the footman, with information. "The 'unt isn't back, sir, but her ladyship left word that lunch was to be served at 1:30 for those as wanted it."

"James—no, that's my own name—I mean George," said James Fielden. "Would it be not cricket, or even something definitely criminal, like shooting a fox, if you brought me a sandwich and a glass of buttermilk, and let me get on with my work?"

"No sir, not at all, sir," said James or George with a grin. "There's only a few for lunch hennyway, sir. There's Lady Clatter—her ladyship is a bit 'ard of 'earing, if you remember—and General Scarrett, that's too old to 'unt, and Mr. 'Astings, that can't because he has a broken collarbone, and the curate that came to see her ladyship about the carpenter threatenin' to vote socialist, only she's 'unting too."

"And so am I," said James. "Hunting for truth and not finding it. Trying to make the dead past give up its dead."

George shuddered slightly. "I don't like to 'ear you talk that way, sir. This place halways gives me the creeps hennyway."

"Haunted?"

"No, sir, not exactly. It's the feeling it gives you. Like a tomb, somehow. And I never go into it but I feel there's somebody here, like. The maids say the same. They won't go into the place alone, at least not after dark. 'Aven't you noticed it?"

Yes, James Fielden thought, as he ate his sandwiches, he had noticed it. A feeling that there was somebody there. His passion for history had always made the oldest and dustiest chronicle come alive as he read it. But this was different. This room felt as though it were haunted by the emanation of another brain, not merely peopled by his own. Not something malign and watching. More something blind and thwarted and brooding.

But perhaps he was merely investing the place with his own mood. Not that he was blind now: he knew now that what he wanted in life was the Lady Niniane, but the price of vision was the realization of its hopelessnes. He recalled with a wry smile the sense of scholarly superiority that had sustained him in his dealings with his fellow men: how futile and insubstantial an air to *amour propre* it seemed in this emergency. The lovely Lady Niniane was a

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wife for a hero. He was only an unheroic figure who had with ridiculous inappropriateness elected to make himself an authority on a heroic age. A weakling pathetically studying the deeds of strong men.

III.

WELL, it was too late now to change. Better to get on with his work and rid Enniscrow Castle as soon as posible of its incongruous guest. In the five recesses there were perhaps two hundred volumes and a wealth of manuscripts. These, working with expert care and swiftness, he had narrowed down to a dozen which bore on the object of his quest. There were copies, earlier than any James had ever seen, of the works of that intriguing bishop-historian, Giraldus Cambrensis. There was a brilliantly illuminated missal containing an old and detailed account of the legend of St. Padarn. There was a very ancient copy of *De Excidio Britanniae* executed in Cymric by a monkish hand on time-defying parchment, but fifteen minutes sufficed to show that, like the English translation which James had already seen, it mystifyingly made no mention of King Arthur or his kingdom. A tenth-century collection of the utterances of the Cymric bards, oracular and obscure though these minor prophets always took care to be, promised well, but on examination proved disappointing. And now James Fielden had come almost to the end of his search and with nothing of value to show for it. There remained in the last recess only a bronze chest, massive and antique, which might, he thought, contain some manuscript of special value. It was green with verdigris, and so much effort was required to turn its huge key that he thought the task would be beyond his strength. But at last the lock clicked open and with a clang that resounded through the room he threw back the top. The chest was empty.

James Fielden felt an almost physical pang of disappointment. The chest had been his last chance. It had, in its age and massiveness, seemed so likely a container of last chances and it had failed him. Strange that it should be empty. If it had held something of value, why and where had it been transferred? If not, why was the coffer here in this storehouse of records? And besides, James Fielden had the illogical, obviously baseless but persistent feeling that there *was* something in it.

He examined it with care. Bottom and sides yielded nothing. But inside the lid was there not, faintly visible, something that looked like an inscription, something— Yes, by gosh, it was an inscription and in ancient Cymric, too. A Cymric inscription inside a Roman coffer! That was interesting, though, for that matter, the Romans must have left behind much beside walled towns, paved roads and aqueducts when they fled back to the heart of their threatened empire.

Now James Fielden, who could not ride a horse or hit a ball, could read Cymric, which is just the oldest kind of Welsh. This is what he read, the translation being his own:

If chest or tomb doth empty seem
Who knoweth if or not, or why?
Till Fate wills, let their secrets lie.
Warned be the mortal that shall pry
To wake the Mighty from his dream.

JAMES FIELDEN ran his dusty fingers through his rumpled hair. Mighty intriguing, all this, but damned puzzling too. *"If chest or tomb—"* Well, this was the chest. And the tomb? "Like a tomb, somehow," had said the footman. Tomb, tomb—why, of course, that must be the tomb, that huge piece of living rock in the sixth recess.

Eagerly he examined it. But nowhere, top or bottom or sides, did he find any crack or cranny which would indicate that this was not what it seemed, solid stone. He tapped it with a heavy

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poker. No hollowness, he could swear.

He re-examined the bronze coffer. It was four feet long, three feet wide, and three feet deep. Its top, front and back were bare of ornament. On each of its two ends was depicted, in half relief, what seemed a representation of the rising sun, with diverging rays. In the center of each disk was a heavy bronze handle. James measured the coffer, inside and out, bottom and sides. The measurements corresponded. Since the coffer was an inch thick everywhere, however, that did not rule out the possibility of a false bottom, or hollow sides. With a careful eye and probing finger he examined every inch of its surface. He found neither crevice, lever, button nor other apparent means of operating a secret panel. He tried pulling and twisting the two rings. They did not move. That left nothing—no, it did leave one thing: the lock.

James closed the lid of the coffer and tried locking and unlocking it. All seemed normal. He threw back the lid and repeated the operation. Oh, oh, that felt different somehow. What was the difference? There was none when he turned the key to the left, as he would ordinarily have done to unlock the coffer. But when he turned it to the right it seemed—yes, it did turn an inch farther than if the lid were down and in process of being locked. Eagerly James jiggled the massive key back and forth, shook and kicked the coffer. Nothing happened.

He was sure he had taken one step in the right direction. It must be some simple form of combination—something else must be pulled or twisted at the same time. If so, that something else could only be the handles. James tried twisting the right-hand handle while holding the key in its extreme rightward position. Nothing happened. He twisted the left handle and, with a clatter, the bronze disk of the rising sun to which the handle was attached came away from its rays and fell to the floor. What it had hidden was a shallow secret compartment. In the compartment was a single sheet of parchment.

James Fielden's fingers trembled with excitement as he took the piece of ancient, crackling parchment from its hiding place of centuries. It also was in Cymric, but the oldest form of it that James had ever seen. The parchment, he knew, must be fourteen or fifteen centuries old. Under the dust and corrosion of the years its message, inscribed in a shaky, spidery hand like that of an old woman, was only faintly visible. But James could read it.

What he read was a Druidic incantation, a formula for the conjuration of mighty natural and demonic forces to insure that the luckless victim on whom it was worked should

". . . lie for always in a waking dream,
Entombed forever in the living rock."

MORE THAN that, the world will never know about it textually, since James Fielden, for reasons that will be obvious, would never publish it, even in safely scientific journals of limited and erudite circulation. For, as everyone knows, there are jealousies even in scientific circles, and who would willingly subject a resentful controversialist to the temptation to silence his antagonist forever?

There was a peculiar, hypnotic quality about the runes, and yet, as he read and reread them, James detected also a certain force and tortuous use of words for which he could not account. It was like a conundrum . . . a conundrum . . . no, not a conundrum, an anagram!

"Good Lord, it's an anagram," said James. "Of course. You recite it backwards and undo the charm. Here goes." And with no thought except to give proper effect to the direful words, he raised a hand over his head and declaimed them in the most sonorous voice he could muster.

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What followed took place so quickly and with such elemental violence that James could never be quite sure what did happen. He had an instant impression of the library being filled with "a sort of roaring darkness" as he expressed it. Storm and avalanche and earthquake and volcano seemed to rage against each other in deafening anarchy. His ears were assailed by sounds like the raving of whirlwinds, screams of anguish and the howling of wolves. The darkness was split by a blinding flash of lightning, there was a shattering crash as of thunder—and all was still again. All was still. But the rocky tomb in the sixth recess lay in fragments on the floor and James Fielden's reeling senses reeled again as he saw the statue that had garnished it standing before him in the form of an aged man of awing appearance who, except that he lacked a scythe, might have been Father Time himself.

James closed his eyes, shook his head and pinched himself. He opened his eyes. The awe-inspiring apparition was still there.

"For God's sake," he said, "who the devil are you?"

"In the name of both those mighty Ones," replied the sage, "I am Merlin."

He spoke in English, which did not surprise James at the time. Neither, when he knew more about Merlin's powers, did it surprise him later.

"Not Merlin, bard and magician of Arthur's time?" he asked incredulously. All this, he knew, was only a dream, but even in a dream, he thought, a scholar should take nothing for granted.

A look of pleasure crossed the severe features of his companion. "Yes, Merlin, counsellor to Vortigern and Uther-Pendragon and later to the holy Arthur," he said. "But that was long ago, and even in my dreams I have been aware that much was changed in the world. Were I not above human weakness I should find it pleasing to discover my name and fame still so pat upon men's lips."

"The world knows a great deal less about you than it would like," said James. "You speak, for instance, of your dreams. Can it possibly be true, then, what we know only by legend, that you were bewitched by Niniane, a king's daughter, with one of your own spells?"

"Strange that you should ask, who have released me from it," said Merlin with a frown. "Yes, Niniane it was. The shameless hussy cozened the spell from me with much asking, on the plea that she would use it on her stepmother, who had looked with little favor on our —association. I was far removed from human deceits and suspected naught. Sorcery I could cope with, and the power of kings. But—it is difficult to explain—the wench had something in her eyes—" He paused.

"Don't explain," said James. "I know a wench of the same description and she also has something in her eyes. She is a daughter of this house. Her name—as it happens—is also Niniane."

MERLIN started violently. His brows contracted and lightnings flashed from under them. "Niniane, did you say? And of this house? Spawn must she be of the same evil breed. This day I shall destroy her and all her kind. Ah, Niniane, daughter of Gwledigau! It has been a long rendezvous with vengeance, but Merlin has kept it." He raised one trembling hand in the air and appeared on the point of beginning one of those mighty conjurations whose efficacy James had seen so overwhelmingly demonstrated.

"One moment," said James hastily. "Before you begin I had better tell you that although it is true that the daughter of this house is called Niniane, it is also written in the books of heraldry

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that her family is descended from the mighty Merlin."

"Ha, what do you say?" replied the sage. "From Merlin? In sooth, young man, that puts a different light on the matter. Mm-m-m. It is true I was fourscore and ten at the time, but as you will understand, far above human limitations." He stroked his beard reminiscently. "Ah, well, young blood, young blood. Immune from the pettiness of mortals, Merlin knows how to be magnanimous and will forgive."

"I'm glad to hear it," said James.

"But Merlin knows how to be grateful, too. It is long since I exercised my powers, but I have no doubt that they will suffice for any common boon. What would you have? A principality? A thousand fighting men? The favor of your king's wife? The hand of a king's daughter?"

"None of those things," replied James hastily. "Glad to have been of service. I don't ask anything at all. Except perhaps a little information. Was Arthur's kingdom in Cornwall or was it in Wales? Did you really bring Stonehenge from Ireland? These stories about Guinevere, now—were they—"

"As for Arthur's kingdom," answered Merlin, "the whole world knows that it extended over Wales and Cornwall both. And farther, too. With my cunning I contrived it so. Stonehenge? Yes, that was a little feat of magic I did to amuse the court. The Irish resented it, as they were using the stones at the time as a foundation for their king's palace. But, then, you couldn't please them. As for Guinevere—ah, well. She was a beautiful, proud woman, and Arthur was ever too much immersed in affairs of state when he might well have left them to me. It was only to be expected. There were—ah, sober, solid men about the court who would have been glad to console her discreetly, but she took an unaccountable fancy to that sprig Lancelot, a brawling meddlesome fellow who used to go around the country righting wrongs, as he called it. A maiden would come to court with a tale about some man. Before she could get the words out of her mouth, Lancelot would be off to kill the fellow who might have had provocation enough, for all he knew. In any case there was the maiden, still wronged, and with the man no longer alive who might have put it right. But we waste time. Never mortal yet but had some wish to gratify. Search your heart. Do you crave love? Distinction? Merlin will grant them."

A WILD IDEA coursed through James Fielden's brain. This, of course, was only a singularly vivid dream, but being in dreamland, why not do as the dreamers do? Why not be honest? He loved Niniane, and the only kind of distinction he valued was that which would lend him favor in her eyes.

"Well," he admitted, "now that you mention it, there is something you could do for me. This girl Niniane, your many-times-great-granddaughter. As it happens, I love her. But, as it happens, she is young and has been taught to value skill in various games and sports which are today what skill with sword and lance was in your time. Is there such a thing as a talisman which would repair my awkwardness in these matters? And, while we are about it, have you a specific charm which would capture the maiden's affections?"

An indulgent smile crossed Merlin's features. "Such boons were the commonplaces of my apprentice days," he said. "Full many a magic sword and spear have I supplied, and a hundred of our British beauties owed their surrender to charms of mine. It is true," he added thoughtfully, "that I never found charm yet that would insure that a woman's affections, once granted, would remain constant. There was Yguerne, wife of the Duke of Cornwall—but that is another story. Take this ring. I

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know naught of these games and sports you speak of, but while you wear it you will win all games or contests you enter. All will be possible for you. Take this parchment. You have but to pronounce what is inscribed thereon, and the love of the woman you desire will be yours, whether she be maid or wedded wife."

"It's very good of you," said James.

"And now," said Merlin, "it is time, Mortal, for me to take my leave."

"Where do you intend to go?" asked James curiously.

"During the last two hundred years of my dream," replied Merlin, "a Yogi who lives and meditates in a cave in the mountains of Tibet was in astral communication with me. He invited me to visit him after my disenchantment, which he predicted. I go now. Fortune be with you."

IV.

AND, WITH complete suddenness, the library was empty. Empty, yes, but on the floor still lay the shattered fragments of Merlin's tomb. Dazed, James looked down at the curiously chased ring of soft, pure gold, that adorned his finger, and the little fragment of parchment in his hand. And then there came a knock at the door.

George, the footman, entered. "Her ladyship," he began, "thought I ought to remind you—" And then his eye caught the chaos on the floor, and he broke off in amazement. "Coo, sir," he said, "we thought it was a clap of thunder. Not as there was a cloud in the sky. But it must 'a' been this here, we heard. What happened, sir?"

"It fell apart," said James truthfully. "While I was working at the books."

"Must 'a' been a bit of a shock, sir."

"It was," said James, "so much so that I could use a good, stiff whiskey right now."

"There's a tray in the 'all, sir, with everything you need. I just put it there."

With his head already in a whirl, James helped himself to two inordinately stiff drinks, which did nothing to compose it. As he dressed with fumbling fingers, he tried to rationalize the disordered record of the afternoon. It couldn't have been a dream, because there in the library was the shattered tomb, and here in his bedroom were the ring and scroll. Could he have found them in the coffer, been dazed by a blow from one of the rock fragments—exploded in some mysterious manner—and then imagined the rest? Could he—well, there was one way of finding out. "Games and contests you will win. All will be possible to you." But he couldn't play games or sports in his bedroom—

And then his eye fell on the bow with its brood of steel-tipped arrows, there on the wall underneath the boomerangs and the assegais. Wasn't archery a recognized sport, even in Merlin's time? A target? His eye fell on the repulsive features of the warthog. "Old boy," said James Fielden, "this is where you get yours."

As he strung the bow and pulled an arrow to its length, he felt a sense of power and sureness flow into him and mingle with the whiskey. Something difficult, now—something worthy of his skill. Say the left nostril.

With a whizz the arrow flew through the air and buried itself exactly in the center of its objective. Another arrow—the right nostril. *Whizz!* The right ear—*whizz!* The left ear—*whizz!* Its right eye—but James had run out of arrows and the mellow notes of a gong floated up from below with its promise of dinner. Should he remove the arrows? "Doggone it, you look better that way," was his conclusion. "Like a pincushion in a nightmare," was his parting shot as he walked gravely downstairs, rejecting a wayward impulse to try the banister.

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As he spoke the last words the ancient tomb exploded outward into rubbish.

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He found his fellow guests discussing over cocktails what had evidently been a satisfactory day's hunting.

"We found in Pool Tail, turned left-handed at Carnage Withyhead, and killed back of Spook Spinney," Sir Bertram was explaining to General Scarrett.

"Your daughters may have your seat," Captain Thruster was maintaining gallantly to the plump but energetic Lady Needbore, "but they'll never have your hands."

Lady Needbore turned to James.

"The man's flattering me," she said.

"Not at all," said James politely. "I think you have very pretty hands."

LADY NEEDBORE goggled. Niniane joined them. "I gather from your expression," she said, "that Mr. Fielden has been giving you some more views on hunting. Last night he said it was all a matter of taste—our bad taste was what he meant."

"I didn't," said James. "And anyway I was wrong. I've been thinking it over. It's not kosher. It's totemism. You've got to kill certain animals in a certain way. The North American Indians used to do it, though they never insisted on a ceremonial costume. If you kill them any other way it's a sin and the animal will haunt you. I should have recognized it. I was wrong."

"Charming of you," said Lady Needbore.

"It seems to make everything all right," said Captain Thruster.

"We're not silly: we're just savages," said Niniane.

"Better than being sissies," James replied agreeably. "I'm thinking of taking up hunting myself."

"Why not tennis?" asked Gerald Brawne, who had drifted to Niniane's side.

"I might play you tomorrow if it's fine," said James.

Mr. Brawne smiled. "It will have to be in the morning then, because I'm going to turn heretic in the afternoon. Golf. Pavlicek, your open champion, is going to play an exhibition against Flammenwerfer—you know, the new German pro who's beaten everybody in Europe?"

"They say it's because he's afraid to lose," said Captain Thruster. "You know—concentrate or concentration camp."

"And we're all driving over to Putting-on-Stones tomorrow to see it," said Niniane.

"I'll go along," said James amiably.

At dinner he found himself sitting beside Niniane. This was a good fortune he had not expected. "Delilah turned censor over the *enfant terrible*," he thought. But the unprecedented combination of Dutch and Welsh courage that fermented within him lent him a unique audacity. James Fielden began to talk. He held Niniane with his glittering eye. He took complete charge of her and the conversation. He talked amply, discriminatingly, but with vigor and animation. His theme was man, strange offspring of cannibal Mother Nature, who had stumbled by accident, when she was not looking, on a terrible weapon called reason. With it, he had grown stronger than Nature, ravished her, enslaved her, and was reaching out for the universe. He was already greater than the universe, for the universe existed only in his mind. He was the real creator. Out of earth and water he had created a world: he had peopled the sky with suns and planets: he was beginning to set bounds to the cosmos.

The story of man, said James, was the story of everything. His story was history. Of savagery and civilization he now talked, and of how the growth of knowledge had not been matched by the growth of wisdom. He talked of nations and he talked of peoples. He talked of little England and its great story, of the Celts and the Romans and the Saxons. Inevitably he came at last to the misty

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but enchanting legend of Arthur, or Arthur's kingdom and his theory of it.

"I have talked too much," he said, "but this part of it should have a special interest for you."

"Oh, I know. Our reputed descent from Merlin and all that sort of thing. But of course we don't take it seriously."

"You should," said James, "because I have good reason to believe it's true. Descended not only from Merlin, but from Niniane, who enchanted him with one of his own spells. One story is that she was a king's daughter. Another is that she was a water fairy. I forgot to ask—that is, I have not been able to find out which. But when I look at her descendant I find either hypothesis credible."

"For a scholar, you pay very pretty compliments. But is that why you came to Enniscrow Castle? To prove that my ancestors were no better than they should be?"

"No, it was to establish a theory of mine that King Arthur ruled in Cornwall and not only in Wales, as everybody else believes."

"And have you done so?" asked Niniane. She was leaning on one elbow, looking into his face, to the neglect of manners and her other dinner partner.

"I think so," said James.

"How splendid to have got what you wanted. You must be very happy."

"Not very happy," said James. "Not happy at all. You see, I found out at the same time that it was not what I really wanted."

"No-o?" said Niniane with surprise. "And what do you really want, then?"

"What all men want sooner or later. Love."

"And did you have to come to Castle Enniscrow to find that out?" asked Niniane smilingly.

"Yes," said James quietly.

"Let us hope that you will be successful in both quests," said Niniane. The tone was light, but something in James Fielden's voice and eyes had faintly flushed her cheek. Opportunely came the sudden scraping of chairs that meant the men were to be left to their port.

DID SHE avoid him after dinner? James, suddenly conscious that he had been guilty not only of verbal hemorrage in general, but the more specific crime of serious conversation at the dinner table, was only too ready to think so. In the grip of such gloomy reflections, he allowed himself to be coerced by Lady Enniscrow into making a bridge fourth. When her further explanations stung him into recollection of the slimness of his theoretical qualifications for the game, and the unvaryingly humiliating character of his experiments in its practice, it was too late to retreat.

"You will enjoy it," said Lady Enniscrow. "Captain Thruster is one of our bridge authorities in England. Some people think Mrs. Curvett is almost as good. General Scarrett's game is a little old-fashioned, but frightfully sound. And I suppose you are very good yourself, like most Americans."

James was about to undeceive her when he remembered Merlin's promise. Wasn't bridge a game?

"I can't say," he said cautiously. "I may be very good and I may be terrible. I never know."

With a smile for this disarming modesty, Lady Enniscrow left the four to their devices. James drew Mrs. Curvett against Captain Thruster and General Scarrett.

"What conventions, partner?" asked that vivacious brunette.

"My game is entirely unconventional," said James.

Mrs. Curvett smiled politely. "Yes, but I mean what system. Culbertson?"

"The Merlin system," said James.

"I never heard of it."

"It's very complicated. No use try-

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ing to explain it now. Just bid as you see fit and leave the rest to me."

Mrs. Curvett stared, Captain Thruster looked dumfounded, General Scarrett barely repressed a snort. The game commenced.

The moment James picked up his hand, he knew the charm was working. He felt his brain grow exact, precise and clear. It felt like a machine, like one of those marvelous indexing machines he had seen in archives and libraries. As he stared at the cards in his hand they became so many mathematical symbols of the working of the great law of chance. He seemed instantly to recognize their pattern and to divine that of the other three hands. He felt his face harden into imperturbability thinly masking—cunning. Into his brain leaped an anguished distrust of his partner, and a conviction that she would let him down. In short, he felt like a good bridge player.

Mrs. Curvett, who had dealt, passed. General Scarrett passed. James, with five tricks in his hand, also passed. When the hand were thrown in, Mrs. Curvett asked with astonishment: "But why didn't you bid, partner?"

"Because of the distribution. All the spades in General Scarrett's hand, all the hearts in Captain Thruster's, and even the diamonds, wouldn't have broken," said James.

"But how on earth did you know all that?" asked Captain Thruster.

"Ah, that's the advantage of the Merlin system," said James.

"I'm glad you haven't had time to explain it to Mrs. Curvett," said Captain Thruster, "but I hope you'll explain it later to me."

GENERAL SCARRETT, who dealt the next hand, promptly called "Two hearts." James, who had drawn the king, jack, ten, seven, six and four of spades, the nine, eight, four and three of hearts, no diamonds, and the ace, king and queen of clubs, said two spades. Captain Thruster said three diamonds and Mrs. Curvett pased without ceremony. Three hearts, said General Scarrett. James called out three spades, followed by four hearts from Captain Thruster, and another pass by Mrs. Curvett.

"Five diamonds," was General Scarrett's next bid.

"Five spades," said James with defiance and, when six hearts was bid against him, he apparently threw caution to the winds and bid six spades.

"Double," snapped General Scarrett, angered at this futile obstinacy.

"Redouble," was James' reply. Captain Thruster led the ten of hearts and, with a look of despair, Mrs. Curvett laid on the table an absolute Yarborough.

Captain Thruster led the ten of hearts. James trumped it and led a club, making the AKQ in his own hand. Then he trumped another heart and led the first of his remaining three clubs from dummy. General Scarrett, after long consideration, trumped with the nine of spades. James overtrumped and entered dummy with another heart. On the next club led, General Scarrett in desperation trumped with the ace of spades and led his king of diamonds. James trumped it in his own hand, trumped his third heart in dummy with his remaining spade, and the lead of dummy's last club made General Scarrett's situation hopeless.

"Six tricks in our combined hands and a little slam is made against us," he said in disgust as he threw down his cards.

"When you kept on bidding and I looked at my perfect Yarborough I thought one of us must be seeing things," said Mrs. Curvett.

"I knew your hand would be good for four tricks in spades," said James.

This was more than General Scarrett could bear. "I am ready to believe in miracles, sir," he said, "but if you knew

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all this, why did you take so long to get up to your little slam?"

"Because if I had gone up quickly you might not have doubled me," said James logically.

General Scarrett's countenance glowed with all the stored-up heat of a thousand chutneys, curries and blazing Indian suns, and it was with a trembling hand that he picked up the cards that James now dealt him. One glance showed James that he had a probable little slam in hearts, for he had ten hearts with all the honors, the ace queen of clubs, and the six of spades. But cards so unbalanced suggested similar possibilities in the other hands, and so it proved. Over James' attempted shut-out bid of six hearts, Captain Thruster immediately bid six spades, and General Scarrett, having no hearts and the ace of diamonds, triumphantly said seven hearts. When Captain Thruster bid seven spades, however, James in his turn bid seven hearts.

"It's an underbid," said Captain Thruster. "You must bid eight hearts."

"But that's impossible," said Mrs. Curvett.

"It's obligatory under the rules," said Captain Thruster.

James promptly bid eight hearts and was doubled. "I suppose I can't redouble?" he asked.

"No," said Captain Thruster.

"Too bad," he commented regretfully.

Captain Thruster led the ace of spades, and Mrs. Curvett, with a stricken face, laid down what is called in better bridge circles an absolute bust. But there was one welcome card in it—the nine of hearts.

CAPTAIN THRUSTER, having won his ace, led the king of spades which James trumped. He then entered dummy by playing a small heart to the nine there, led a club and finessed his queen. He could now have laid down his hand, but instead one after another he played out five hearts. Captain Thruster threw away spades and General Scarrett clubs. Then James suddenly shifted to his ace of clubs. Captain Thruster and dummy followed suit and General Scarrett discarded a diamond.

"Having no clubs, partner?" asked Captain Thruster.

"No clubs," said the general.

James then laid down his hand.

"It takes twelve tricks, and General Scarrett has revoked by not playing his two of clubs on my ace," he said. "He had it tucked in with his spades. Two tricks for the revoke gives me eight hearts, doubled, for the game and rubber."

There was a moment of paralyzed silence. Then General Scarrett, with great dignity, thrust back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Sir," he said, "I owe you nine pounds fifteen on the rubber. Here it is. In thirty years of play, sir, I have never seen any bridge like yours. There may be a place for it on the stage, among the other mystery turns. But this happens to be an English country house. And now, if you will permit, I should like to say good night.'

General Scarrett retired in good order. Crestfallen, James regarded his rigid and retreating form.

"I'm sorry the general took it that way," he said. "Of course, as it happened, we had all the luck."

"I don't think it's the luck he objected to," said Captain Thruster. "By the way, I shan't ask you to explain your system after all. I'm afraid I couldn't afford to make use of it." And Captain Thruster also departed.

Only Mrs. Curvett was left. "What was wrong with my system anyway?" James asked her, aggrievedly.

Mrs. Curvett stuffed her winnings into her evening bag, delicately inserted another cigarette in a long, jade holder, and rose.

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"I don't see any reason why I should complain about it myself," she said, "especially as I don't know what it is. But you will admit it's a bit bizarre."

Yes, James had to admit, his performance had been bizarre. Like the Indian rope trick or sawing a woman in half. People who set such store by games shouldn't object when they lost them. But it was the story of fox hunting all over again. You must win only in a certain way. It was not essentially that his system was unfair, for the mere existence of good bridge players, when you thought about it, was unfair to poor ones. But it was unfair in the wrong way. What would Niniane think when she heard about it? He must be more careful when next he made use of the Merlin formula.

V.

JAMES WENT early to bed. The warthog, he noticed, had been deprived of his feathered embellishments. He could only speculate on the thoughts that must have crowded the brain of the housemaid who removed them. Did she think he was insane? Or had she, perhaps, shared his feelings about the odious mask that now again stared down at him in its pristine horribleness?

Early to bed meant early to rise. James, stepping outdoors into a golden September morning, heard a *plonk, plonk, plonk,* from the tennis courts. It was Niniane and Gerald Brawne. Throwing the whole weight of her splendid young body into her shots, and covering her court with the speed of a young antelope, Niniane seemed to James to be giving her distinguished opponent an even battle. But she knew better, and at James' appearance threw down her racket.

"He never makes a mistake," she said. "But simply *never*. It's heartbreaking. You take him on, Mr. Fielden. Try your system on him. I hear you're strong on system."

"Yes, of course. You challenged me yesterday, didn't you?" said young Mr. Brawne, every wave of his dark hair as neatly in place as the pleats in his tennis trousers. "Were you pulling my leg, or are you somebody pretty good, one of those dark horses, you know?"

"More likely just a silly ass," said James. "Still I'll play you."

"Slaughter each other, please," said Niniane. "I feel like a Roman holiday."

"You serve," said young Mr. Brawne.

James had played, in all his life, perhaps half a hundred games of tennis. But when he swung Niniane's racket at his first service ball, he knew that it was not going to matter. And it did not. The racket swished down, then up and forward with such speed that Niniane's dazzled eye could not follow it. There was a terrific *plonk*. There was, in mid-air, a sort of explosion. And then James was dusting fragments of cloth and rubber off his face and Mr. Brawne was dazedly asking "What happened?"

"I think the ball must have burst," said James.

"'Straordinary," said young Mr. Brawne. "Take two more."

But one more was enough. This ball was made of sterner stuff. It did not burst. It merely whizzed through the air like a high-velocity shell, raised the dust in the most inaccessible corner of Mr. Brawne's forehand court, burst its way through green canvas and stop netting at the back, and was never seen again.

"My God," said young Mr. Brawne, who had been caught flat-footed by all these developments.

James crossed to his backhand court and served again. Again came a swish, a whizz, a patch of dust, and another yawning hole in the court surround. The face of his opponent, who had not yet succeeded in getting his racket on the ball, turned a deep red.

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Poising himself like a cat, Mr. Brawne awaited the next service with an air of grim determination. It came, he leaped convulsively to the right and stabbed at it with outstretched racket. There was a splintering sound and a second later the racket, with a broken frame, was lying against the stop netting and Mr. Brawne was dazedly regarding his empty and stinging fingers.

"Sorry," said James.

MR. BRAWNE looked at him. Then he looked at Niniane. With a great dignity and deliberation he helped himself to another of the three rackets without which he had not for years made his appearance on any court.

Mr. Brawne acted in this measured manner because he had not the slightest idea what to do next. As it turned out, this did not matter. Fate did it for him. For James' next service ball, rising from the ground like a bullet, hit young Mr. Brawne fairly and squarely in the midriff, drove him back a yard, and prostrated him flat on his back. Minus wind and consciousness, the rising tennis hope of Britain lay spread-eagled beneath the skies and did not move.

"When I asked you to slaughter each other," said Niniane, "I did not know you were going to take me so literally." Her face was pale.

Still paler was James as he ran for help. Young Mr. Brawne, his raven hair now falling interestingly over a pallid brow, was carried into the house. A doctor, hastily summoned, gave his verdict.

"Two broken ribs and a terrific bruise. Lucky it wasn't worse. But he won't play any more tennis this year."

"That means the Davis Cup will go to France—or America," said Captain Thruster in a flat voice. Elaborately he avoided looking at James.

"That it should have happened under my roof," mourned Sir Bertram, ignoring the fact that Mr. Brawne had been stricken under the open sky. "By Gad, sir," he said to the sheepish James, "the powers of destruction seem to be keeping a rendezvous with you. A monument stands for a thousand years unharmed in my library, but wrecks itself when you look at it. Poor Brawne plays tennis five years without a scratch and the first time he meets you gets his ribs broken."

"Perhaps Mr. Fielden doesn't know his own strength," said Mrs. Curvett.

"He can gauge it very well at bridge," said Captain Thruster.

James, looking about him, saw every well-bred countenance fixed in lines of resentment and disapproval. "What can I say?" he cried. "Except, that if I had any idea this would happen, I never would have touched a racket. But you people are all so enthusiastic about games, I thought . . . I felt I would try to enter into the spirit of the occasion—"

"Well, you did it," said Captain Thruster; "the spirit of the occasion and very nearly the body of Mr. Brawne. Well, who's for Putting-on-Stones and golf this afternoon?"

"I am," said Niniane. "And Mr. Fielden had better come so that we can keep an eye on him. And you, Harold?"

"Yes," said the young diplomat, for it was Mr. Anthony. "Some of the German crowd may be there, and you never know when you can pick something up."

He was right. Some of the German crowd were there, including a young attache with whom Mr. Anthony entered into an animated conversation. He talked perfect German, to which the German insisted in replying in faultless English. The German champion was there, looking Aryan enough to delight Mr. Hitler's eye with his close-cropped blond hair, his light-blue eyes, his perfectly trained figure, his look of bristling and brittle dignity. The German champion's German caddie was there. He

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had arrived the day before and had made an intelligence map, drawn to scale, of every hole. On this his chief had charted every drive, iron, chip and putt. It merely remained to carry out this meticulous plan of campaign, and that he could do so the champion had assured himself by hours and days and weeks and months of practice. What his opponent might do, he did not allow to trouble his calculations. He had yet to meet an opponent who could do himself justice against this methodical, merciless, mathematical application of science to sport.

BUT THE American champion was not there. Three o'clock came, but not Mr. Pavlicek. Three o'clock passed and so did the patience of Mr. Flammenwerfer and his supporters.

"Es ist unerhort," he said. "So long to wait. This American comes not and sends even no word. *Er will mich beleidigen!"*

"He says your champion is trying to insult him," said Harold Anthony. "Nazis take those things so seriously."

"Pavlicek," snorted the champion in another outburst. *"Was fur ein Amerikaner ist das! Veilleicht is er nicht sogar ein Arier."*

"Hm-m-m," said Mr. Anthony. "He says your man is a coward, and afraid to meet him."

"What nonsense," said James.

"Of course," agreed Mr. Anthony amiably. "Although, from what I hear, Flammenwerfer would be sure to win."

At the words "sure to win," a thought flashed through James' mind. "I know someone," he thought grimly, "who would be even surer to win." And what better use could he make of Merlin's gift than to exercise it for the honor of his country and the temples of its gods, especially that of the great god Golf? Resolve gripped him.

"Ask him," he said, "whether, rather than disappoint everybody, he would care to play against an American amateur."

"But heavens, man, surely you can't play his kind of golf," said Mr. Anthony.

"I'm not sure, but perhaps I can play a better kind," said James.

It was arranged. As Mr. Anthony put it, what the crowd had gathered for was to see the great Flammenwerfer play golf. Rather than disappoint them, an American amateur would deputize for his professional compatriot who, for all they knew, might have been killed or injured en route. Surely the great Flammenwerfer, in the circumstances, would not disappoint his admirers? Of course it would merely be an exhibition—

The great Flammenwerfer consented. Clubs and a caddie were found for James. The first hole was a slight dog leg, 450 yards. The German played a faultless drive just to the left of the angle of woods that made the dog leg. James took out his driver. He had played golf intermittently between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, and never since.

"By the way," he said, "these are right-handed clubs."

"Yes, sir," said his caddie. "Why?"

"I'm left-handed," said James, "but I guess it doesn't matter."

IT DIDN'T. As he swung, aiming in the general direction of the hole and leaving the rest to Merlin, James felt his body coil up into something like a stainless steel spring lubricated with honey. There was a high-pitched *swish-h,* a *crack* like the sound a bullet makes in the ear of the man whom it has just missed, a follow through that wound James up like a corkscrew, and the ball flew like a comet over the woods.

"Man, what a drive!" said James' caddie, looking at him with respect. Even Flammenwerfer looked surprised.

His surprise, however, did not interfere with his playing a faultless high

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pitch that lit on the green and rolled to within two feet of the hole. And James' ball was nowhere to be seen.

But there was a shout from the spectators gathered about the green. They pointed toward the flag. James and his caddie looked at each other with a wild surmise. It was true. The ball was in the hole, a 450-yard hole in one.

"It came over the woods like a bullet, missed me by an inch and just rolled straight in," said an excited young woman with a shooting stick.

"Ah, a lady killer," murmured Niniane, who had followed the players to the green. But James thought he read admiration in her eyes.

There was none in Flammenwerfer's, who looked darkly suspicious and muttered gutturally as they went to the next tee.

The second hole was a short one. But such a formidable one-shotter, 180 yards long, ringed round with deep and deadly sand traps, the green narrow, hard and guileful of contour. To play for the hole was to roll past it and on into a bunker. To play safe was possible, but in that event a cunning slope enticed the ball to the most distant edge of the green. There was a third method, of course, but since that required pitching the ball directly into the hole, nobody had ever tried it.

But that was how James played it. Before the startled caddie could pluck the flag from the hole, his ball had dropped neatly into it, wedging itself between pin and cup to obviate any possibility of bouncing out again.

There was a long-drawn "Ah-h-h" from the crowd massed around the green. Two consecutive holes in one! The like had never been seen or heard of.

Flammenwerger tried hard, but could not duplicate the feat. Looking like a Siegfried who has just discovered that the dragon has stolen his enchanted sword, he strode to the next hole.

James also felt embarrassed, if for different reasons. He could not go on like this, winning every hole in one. Surely the charm must allow him some choice of method. He remembered that in his mind, as he had hit his tee shot at the previous two holes, had been merely his objective, and the desire to get there. This time he would select a mark somewhere short of the green.

IT WAS a long hole, 560 yards. James aimed at a spot 200 yards away. Straight as an arrow, the ball flew there.

Two hundred yards was no drive for a champion. With something almost like a smile, Flammenwerfer slammed his ball seventy yards farther. James picked out another spot on the fairway, well short of the green, and hit it neatly. Flammenwerfer, certainly a brave and gifted golfer when not warring against the fates, dropped his second shot dead for an assured birdie three.

James thought he had better let him win the hole. He aimed for the rough right of the green. The ball started in the desired direction but curved in midair, dropped on the green and rolled, still curving, into the hole. Flammenwerfer was a man of iron. But even iron can lose its temper. Perhaps that hitherto imperturbable champion lost his, for he missed his two-foot putt.

Had it really been Flammenwerfer's fault, James wondered, or was it that the charm would not permit him to lose a hole? He determined to give it the acid test. Meandering diagonally across the fairway, 200 yards from the fourth tee at its nearest, was a sluggish brook. With great deliberation he drove his ball into it and saw with satisfaction the resulting splash of muddy water. Flammenwerfer, snatching at his advantage, drove a ball over the brook and beautifully down the middle of the fairway.

James found a crowd of commiserating spectators around his ball, and saw to his delight that its position was hope-

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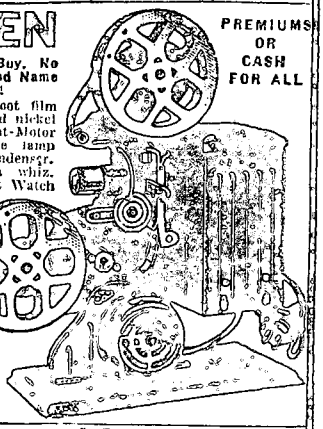

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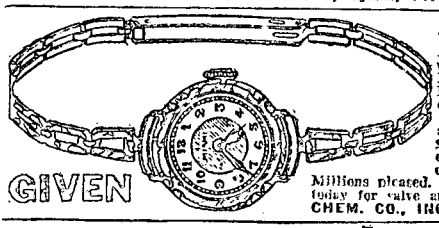

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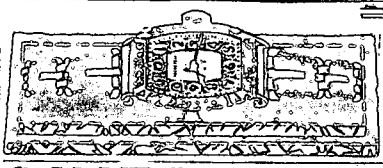

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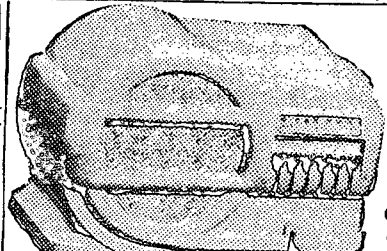

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"It wasn't fair, perhaps, and it caused no end of trouble, I know," he sighed, "but it was altogether accidental—"

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less. Half embedded in sludge under four inches of water, it nestled for further safety against one end of a board which acted as a retaining wall for the muddy farther side of the ditch.

"It's unplayable. He'll have to go back and drive another," said his caddie gloomily.

But James would have none of it. He did not intend to imperil this heaven-sent opportunity to lose the hole. Placing one foot on a stone and the other on the bank, he swung gallantly with a niblick in the general direction of the ball where it lay dimly gleaming in its sure refuge. Opponent and spectators drew back to evade the expected splash. But what happened defeated all precaution. Like an ax in the hands of a berserk woodsman, the niblick divided the waters, cleaved the mud, struck the ball, and heaved it and the nearer end of the six-foot retaining board which blocked it high in the air. The board, still held at its farther end, catapulted sideways a fountain of water and what seemed like half a ton of black and incredibly clinging mud. When it descended, neither Flammenwerfer nor that politely dressed crowd of spectators looked like anything their mothers would have recognized. They suggested nightmares, voodoo visions in the jungle, surrealist adventures in Harlem, but nothing English or Aryan. It was difficult to recognize in Mr. Anthony, for instance, anything that suggested a diplomat, even from Liberia. Nor had Niniane, that lovely girl, escaped unscathed. By the time James began his apologies she had achieved little more than recognizability. But it must be said in her favor that her sense of humor emerged with her features. When James proffered his more adequate handkerchief she laughed hysterically.

"Is this a golf game," she asked, "or a political campaign?"

James found his ball in the middle of the fairway, a long but not impossible shot to the green. His opponent's disposition had not been improved by his involuntary mud bath, but he played a long brassie shot within fifty yards of the flag. It was evident that on this 550-yard hole he would get at worst a five, and perhaps a four. It was equally evident to James that if he himself played a third shot to the green it would, with direful certainty, roll into the hole. He resolved to aim it anywhere but in the proper direction. On the left of the fairway no trouble offered, but the right was bordered by thick woods in which a red-roofed bungalow nestled. James played for the corner of the bungalow and was rewarded by the sharp sound of a ball alighting on tiles.

VI.

FOLLOWED by his bewildered caddie, he strode into the woods. His ball had struck the roof and rebounded some ten feet. Between it and the green lay the bungalow: between it and the adjacent fairway lay the impenetrable wood. James looked at the trim but solid mass of the bungalow and exulted. A placid cat, drowsing on a window sill, opened its eyes sleepily, regarded him for a moment, and closed them again. Perhaps it was reassured by the sight of the club secretary among the handful of officials and spectators who had followed James into the wood and now commiserated with him. For this was the secretary's bungalow and behind the ground-glass window, though the secretary did not know this, lay his young wife in a bath of agreeable warm water. This lady, being of a luxurious habit, was wont to temper the ardors of the toilet, with the pleasures of literature. The book she had chosen being as soothing as her scented bath water, she now found herself in much the same halcyon state of mind as her cat Daisy, which slumbered so sweetly on the windowsill without. Neither pet nor mistress, just then, was ready for any abrupt rendez-

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vous with Fate. And yet they were to keep one, and that soon.

At that very moment, in fact, Fate's instrument stood poised, niblick in hand, with the intention of wasting a shot against the side of the bungalow under the pretense of trying to loft a ball over its roof. Alas for the plans of cats and men, for the sanctity of the home and the modesty of women! No sooner had James begun his backswing than he felt the club take charge. Like a white streak the ball flew, not against the brick wall, but against the frail window. Shattering its single pane to fragments, it whizzed with undiminished speed diagonally across the bathroom, crashed through the window of the adjoining wall, and a few seconds later a muffled shout announced its arrival on or near the distant green.

But before that was heard, a large number of other things had happened at once. It is doubtful whether a cat of domesticated habits could ever be expected to remain calm when deluged unexpectedly with large fragments of broken glass. This one was in a state of unique unpreparedness for anything of the kind. When she erupted into the air with every hair and whisker standing on end, Daisy was already a severe case of nerves. With a vague idea that the danger had come from without, she leaped blindly toward the interior of the bathroom and safety. She found none, for instead the waters of the bath closed over her head. Now water, however warm, is no element for a cat, and this one was in a mood to clutch at any straw. She discovered something more substantial in the body of her mistress, who, equally startled but less prompt in her reaction, had just begun to emerge from the bath on her own account. As rapidly as an electric current, and with much the same effects, Daisy swarmed up the tender walls of this human ark, finally to dig in at the highest point she could find.

Now probably the best thing to do if you are in a bath and a cat has taken refuge on your head is to put your head under water and encourage the cat to find some other way out of its difficulties. But the club secretary's wife did not think of that. Instead, with a single piercing scream, she leaped from the middle of the bath to the middle of the room. The window was low, as is the case in bungalows, and now that it was minus its ground glass, lay wide to the astonished gaze of the little party without.

THEY HAD a vague impression of Aphrodite arising from the waves with record speed and a dash of Medusa about the head. In the next breath Susanna perceived the Elders, and tried to walk through the closed door of the bathroom. That, of course, cannot be done, no matter how loudly one shrieks. By the time the lady had discovered this, her husband, galvanized into action by this sudden exposure of his domestic sanctities to the vulgar gaze, had raced through the bungalow to the bathroom door. To tear the spitting, clawing Daisy from his spouse's head and to fold her in his reassuring arms was the work of a moment, and here it would be proper to leave them, as did the rueful James and his little following. Of these the younger element were almost helpless with laughter. Among them, it is regrettable to note, was Niniane.

"I sa-i-d you were a lady killer," she gurgled. "But have . . . have you no shame at all?"

In contrast to the ribald mirth which it had excited among their juniors, older spectators of the harrowing event were not amused. Although not ready to affirm that James had deliberately driven his ball through the window as the only way to the green, they felt a sense of outrage that such things should be allowed to happen to an English woman on an English golf course. James caught

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EARNINGS

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Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

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You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $35, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with: Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.63 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

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murmurs of "By Gad, sir—" "preposterous shot," "totally unnecessary," "clowning, not golf—" which heightened his already acute embarrassment. It was nowise lessened by the fact that prolonged screams from the direction of the bungalow indicated that the lady was now indulging in a fit of hysteria.

James felt that he would like to do the same. It was with burning ears and a scarlet face that he addresed his ball, which he found lying some forty yards short of the green. This preposterous comedy, this parody of a golf game, must be ended, he was resolved, here and now. He would knock his ball into the middle of next week. And then—the bright thought struck him just as he began a vicious backswing with this intention—he would remove Merlin's ring from his finger, toss it into the thickest rough he could find, lose a dozen holes to the worthy Flammenwerfer, and retire before he had done further damage.

Alas for good intentions! The worthy Flammenwerfer, as it happened, had played his fifty-yard pitch to within a long but posible putt from the hole and now stood beside the green waiting for his rival to match it. With amazement he saw James open his shoulders and swing into his thirty-yard chip shot with enough energy for a full drive. And that was the last Herr Flammenwerfer was to see for some time. Hit with a driver, James' ball would probably have killed him. Hit with a mashie niblick, it merely gave him concussion of the brain.

"He will live," was the doctor's verdict, "but the sooner he gets to a hospital the better."

LIKE Mr. Brawne before him, Herr Flammenwerfer was borne away. His ears, had they been functioning, would have recorded above an excited buzz of conversation from the English-speaking crowd, and the soprano keening of the lady of the bungalow, now in diminuendo, loud shouts of Teutonic indignation from his own compatriots. Where English spectators of James Fielden's methods had only doubts, they appeared to cherish certainties that this was all part of a dark and devious Anglo-American plot against their champion. Had he not been the butt of trickery or black art? Had not mud been thrown at him—at them all? And finally had he not been a victim of assault and battery? There were threats of diplomatic protest, and even of immediate physical retaliation.

Mr. Anthony's face, black and pink before, turned black and white. "For God's sake come away," he appealed to James, "before they make an international incident of this. It's bad enough as it is. If only it had been someone else who arranged it!"

Niniane reinforced his pleading. "If the Germans don't get you," she said, "just think what the secretary is apt to do!"

"Would the charge be housebreaking," asked Captain Thruster sardonically, "or indecent assault?"

James had no reply to these quips. His sense of humor refused to function. He felt sorry for the poor lady of the bath, sorry for poor Herr Flammenwerfer, sorriest for himself. He had hoped to shine in Niniane's eyes. Instead he had become a figure of fun himself, and inflicted physical damage and mental pain on other totally innocent persons. It was all that fool Merlin with his slapdash methods. His magic was potent, but showed a certain medieval lack of discretion. James began to understand why miracles had dropped so inevitably out of religious practice. They complicated everything.

He sat glum and silent on the journey home. At dinner he found himself between Lady Clatter and Lady Needbore. Lady Clatter kept her ear trumpet turned the other way and Lady Needbore devoted herself ostentatiously to the partner on her right. The tale of

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his latest misdoing had obviously become common property. The older members of the house party were sending him to Coventry. The younger ones burst into laughter every time they looked in his direction, which was almost as bad. James gazed straight ahead and devoted himself to his dinner. The service was good at Enniscrow Castle. As fast as the nervous James emptied his glass it was filled again, and by the time dinner was over the edges of his discomfiture—and of everything else—were a little blurred.

This was well, because the situation did not improve. James drifted diffidently up to a group gathered around Niniane and found them discussing the next day's hunting. They greeted him with merry cries.

"Enter the gladiator," "Make way for the killer," "Here comes false Sextus, that did the deed of shame."

"Pay no attention to them, Mr. Fielden," said the Lady Niniane soothingly. "Their remarks, when not indelicate, are inspired by jealousy and fear. What we want to know is whether now that you have—ah—devastated other fields of sport you will come hunting with us tomorrow."

"I am going back to London tomorrow," said James stiffly.

"All the more reason why you should come hunting," said Niniane. "No, I mean it," she said, dropping her bantering tone. "Will you come?"

James found himsef looking into her eyes and saying "I promise," when he had intended nothing of the kind.

Captain Thruster broke the spell. "If you are coming," he said, "I shall borrow a crash helmet."

"And I'll bring a dressing gown," said young Pamela Needbore with a giggle, "in case of emergency."

INDECOROUS laughter pursued James as he walked away. But it was more welcome than the cold silence he encountered everywhere else. He drifted into the billiard room. Three members of the hunting crowd possessed it, genial souls whom James remembered to have seen nightly, consuming brandies and sodas as he went his way to bed. They called each other Bunny, Dodo and George, and James was not then or after to know them by any other names. Ordinarily he would not have sought their company. But tonight he was a derelict and they so much flotsam and jetsam floating on a common tide of alcohol.

There was, at any rate, neither frowning nor frigidity here. They invited him to join their game. He declined quickly. Billiard balls, he reflected, were even harder and more deadly than golf balls, and he had no desire further to tempt Merlin and his allies, the unkind Fates. They invited him to have a drink. He accepted. The drink, and others which followed it, dissolved his mood of depression. He began to see the ridiculous side of his day's adventures. Pressed for a first-hand relation, he supplied it with a precise choice of descriptive phrase and a dry underlining of bizarre detail that his new friends found irresistible. They were seized by paroxysms of laughter, but James, in his present mood, found it all friendly, and healing.

"You're slaying me. By Jove, you're slaying me," cried the one who was known as George. "Bunny was right. He said you were pulling Sir Bertram's leg the other night. About huntin', you know."

"By Gad, so he did," Dodo agreed. Dodo was very tall, very solemn, and his red hair was parted in the middle. "Though how he knew beats me."

"It was because he kept his face so straight," said Bunny complacently. "Nobody but a curate could keep his face as straight as that and mean it."

"I'll wager you hunt yourself," said George.

"I don't," said James, "but now that

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you remind me, I thought of learning the sport tomorrow. I suppose I should get to bed early."

"To hell with bed," said George. George was the red-faced one. "The night's young and the brandy's old."

"No," said Bunny, "he's right, you know. If we're going to hunt we mustn't get boiled. And I'm beginning to simmer myself."

"You'll take your fences all the better for it tomorrow," said George. "But I'll tell you what. We'll do what we used to do in our mess in India. It was at Peshawar, you know, in the hill country, which meant that you always had to be ready for a night alarm whether you were on duty or not. So we made it a rule that when no one was left who could stand on his head we all went to bed."

"Sounds silly to me," said Dodo. "Why didn't you walk a chalk line?"

"We used to," said George. "And to make it harder you had to walk it with your eyes closed. And then a fellow came to our mess named Hare—March Hare we called him, for he was as mad as one when he was sober. But do you know, that fellow could walk a chalk line with his eyes shut when the rest of us were all under the table! And it wasn't until they caught him walking the ridge-pole of a marquee in his pajamas one night that we knew why. He was a somnambulist. So we changed to standing on your head. It's harder. It makes the fumes rush there or something."

"I don't know whether I could even do it cold sober," objected James.

"Neither do I," agreed Bunny, "but I'll bet you all a pound I last longest."

"It's a new game to me," said Dodo, "but I'll take you."

"And I'm on," said George.

AT THE WORD "game" a warning bell seemed to ring in James' brain, but so faintly and from so far away that he heeded it not. "Count me in," he said, "I might have beginner's luck."

George placed a cushion on the floor and with the assistance of his two hands and several grunts balanced himself upside down upon it. James, to his surprise, was able to imitate him. So was Bunny. But when the solemn Dodo hoisted his long legs into the air he lost his equilibrium and fell with a loud crash through the doors of the billiard room. To the ladies of the house party, ascending at the moment like angels to bed, his prone form, with the red faces and loud laughter of his companions for background, conveyed a brief but unholy suggestion of bacchanalia and that purely masculine and clownish ribaldry which women do not understand and therefore cannot pardon. Had the mouth of hell opened, displaying Satan and his imps complete with horns and tails, Lady Clatter and Lady Needbore at least could scarcely have looked more disapproving.

Dodo, looking sheepish, picked himself up and closed the door. James was perturbed, but George was no whit abashed.

"Don't worry about those two old busybodies," he said. "You've done them a service, Dodo—given them a bit of scandal to take to bed with them. Eleanor Enniscrow is a good sport, likes her guests to enjoy themselves. Let's have another drink. Do you feel a burning sensation in your pockets? It's those three pounds I am going to win."

"Over my—hic—dead body," said Bunny.

"Over your dead-drunk body, you mean," said George. "And, by the way you're hiccuping, I don't think it will be long now."

"You're quite wrong," said Bunny with dignity. "It's not the brandy; it's the soda. I'm always likely to get it when I drink soda. It runs in our family."

"You mean it blows in your family," said George unfeelingly. "It's just the

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wind blowing through your family tree."

"It's—hic—no joke," said Bunny. "People have—hic—died of it. I remember one of my aunts—hic—hiccuping for a whole day. They had to give her drugs to—hic—quiet her."

James looked sympathetic. "I have heard," he remarked, "that if you drink out of the wrong side of a glass it stops you."

"I've tried it," said Bunny, "but, dash it—hic—my neck is so stiff or something that I don't—hic—seem able to manage it."

"Why don't you stand on your head," volunteered George, "and then drink in the ordinary way? It should amount to the same thing."

Bunny looked doubtful, but Dodo, whose fall had barred him from continuing the contest, but not the brandies and sodas, loudly agreed that it would be either the same or better. So Bunny, with some difficulty, again stood on his head.

"We had better not give him any soda," said George, "because that makes him hiccup." He poured out half a glass of neat brandy and began carefully to decant it into the open mouth of his friend. The operation had to be interrupted from time to time to allow Bunny to hiccup, and finally, despite George's care, a gulp going down met, somewhere in Bunny's weasand, a hiccup coming up. He collapsed on the floor with a crash and coughed and sputtered so alarmingly that George and James stood him on his feet, and George slapped him vigorously on the back. Under these rude ministrations he regained his breath.

"Hang it," he said, "I thought for a moment I wash drowned. Of all the shilly-ass ideas, George, you get the shilliest."

"Just the same it's cured your hiccups," said George.

And so it had. The brandy had cured Bunny's hiccups, but at the expense of his sobriety. He relapsed upon a sofa and ceased to take an active interest in his surroundings. By this time Dodo was loudly asleep in a chair.

VII.

GEORGE, obviously a drinker of proved ability and long experience, was still holding out. But his face was purple and in his speech and movements deliberation was thinly masking difficulty. He was drinking more and more slowly, and each time he upended himself his balance was obviously more precarious. Finally he attained an equilibrium so brief that its achievement and termination looked less like a headstand than a somersault. But the only effect of James' potations had been to give him a feeling of complete, almost supernatural control over his faculties. It was so acute that he felt he could, if he wished, take off from the floor and float around the room. Instead, he matched George's sketchy performance with an equilibristic feat that normally he would have found completely impossible and equally distasteful. He stood on his head, folded his arms on his chest, clapped his heels together several times, cried, "Look George!" and then regained his feet by means of a neat handspring.

George's feelings found vent.

"Dammit," he said, "it's not human. The more you drink the better you get. We've had fifteen double brandies and all they've done is to give you a wild look in your eye."

James laughed heartlessly. "Beware! Beware! My flashing eyes, my floating hair," he declaimed. "Don't you know, George, that I on honey-dew have fed and drunk the milk of Paradise?"

"It may be milk to you," said George, "but it'sh beginning to sour on me." With obvious reluctance he drained another glass, hoisted himself to his feet and approached the cushion. His inten-

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tion was to drop on his knees, place his head upon it and hoist himself heavenward as before. But George's timing had been affected by his libations. He forgot about his knees, and merely tried with head and hands to make a three-point landing on the cushion. It was notably unsuccessful. He crashed to the floor, and lay spread-eagled upon it in the attitude which, James thought, seemed to have become characteristic of all who engaged in any form of competition with him.

Without opening his eyes, George murmured: "You've won. Firsh time ever beaten. Here's pound." But before he could pay his wager, alcohol, reinforced perhaps by slight concussion, took him to its own, and George lay slumbering heavily but peacefully upon the carpet.

At the words, "You've won," James felt his unnatural sobriety drop away and drunkenness rush upon him. The vivid perceptiveness, the acute sense of co-ordination in which he had been rejoicing a moment before disappeared. His mind, which had been like a searchlight on a clear night, became like a candle in a fog. He seemed to be looking at his three snoring companions as though through the large end of an opera glass. The faint warning chime whose signal he had disregarded two hours earlier began to ring again, this time like a passing bell. "You've been playing games again," was its message, "and of course you had to win, and now you've won and you're drunk, you're befuddled, you're besotted. Worse, you've betrayed three better men into the same condition. What will Enniscrow Castle think when it sees them lying there next morning? What will Niniane think?"

WHAT indeed? As James stood swaying on his feet, with wave after wave of intoxication rolling over his head and threatening to drag him out into a sea of oblivion, he knew that something must be done. He must get George and Bunny and Dodo to bed. He opened the door of the billiard room, to be confronted with deep darkness. Someone had turned off the lights that should have illuminated hall and stairway. James felt along walls, fell over chairs and sofas, but could find no switches. And then he remembered the pleasing custom whereby, in this day of grace and electricity, guests of Enniscrow Castle were still supplied with candles in ancient silver sconces, to light their way to bed. There should be some in the billiard room.

There were. James lighted one and again explored for switches. But he found none, for they had been put by design in places where they would not show. Very well then: he would use candles. He lighted more of them and placed them at strategic points. He dragged the limp form of Bunny to the foot of the staircase. With more difficulty he did the same for the lengthy Dodo. But George had been designed for cargo capacity rather than streamlines, and to make port with him strained James' rapidly declining energies. He had his three friends at the foot of the staircase, but he knew now that it was as far as he could bring them. Self-preservation dictated that he should go upstairs himself while the going was good. But dimly through his brain coursed the thought: Supposing people should come downstairs in the dark and step on Dodo, or Bunny or George? Suppose George, or Bunny or Dodo should waken and find themselves in unrelieved gloom? They might hurt themselves. They might be afraid of the dark and have hysterics. James made a last, unsteady voyage to the library, lighted every candle he found there and set them carefully about the three recumbent and parallel forms.

Mistily, as he took a last look at the scene, he became aware that it suggested some familiar association. The

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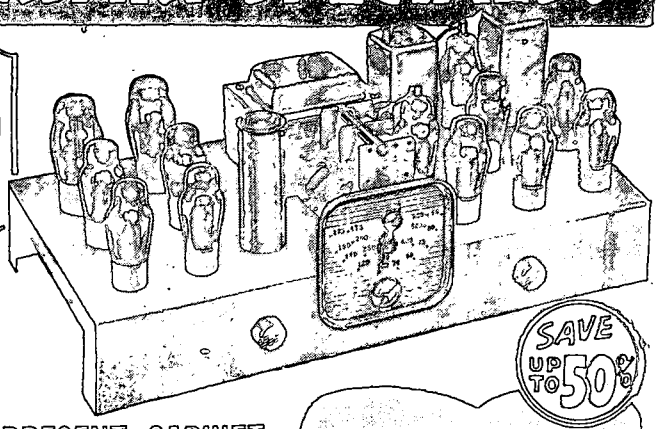

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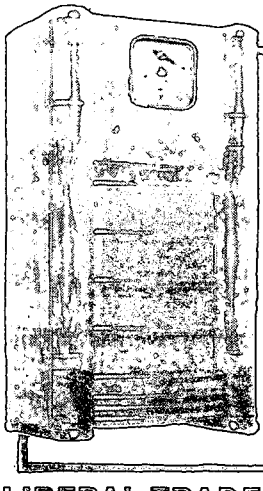

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still forms, the flickering candles, what was it? "Why, of course," he said to himself, "opera, Tosca, Scarpia. Tha'sh what they are, Scarpias. Three Scarpias. But I didn't kill them, and I don't feel like singing about them either. Anyway, it'sh time for bed."

It was high time for bed. Half way up the stairs James found his equilibrium deserting him. He begin to complete the journey on his hands and knees.

It was at this juncture that Lady Needbore pased along the dimly lighted hallway at the head of the stairs. Perhaps she had been helping her friend, Lady Clatter, to bring up to date for castle and county the *chronique scandaleuse*. For this sort of journalism, like others, is mostly done at night. The suspicion, on the other hand, may be unworthy, and Lady Needbore, as one who would rather prevent scandal than retail it, may merely have been paying a nocturnal visit to her daughters. And there is always the fact that the bathroom facilities at Castle Enniscrow were overtaxed by the unusual proportions of the house party.

WHATEVER the reason, it is a matter of simple history that Lady Needbore, in a dressing gown, passed the head of the stairway as James, on his hands and knees, had all but gained its top step. What followed was not so simple, and drama rather than history. Viewed from the top of the stairs in the flickering light of the corpse candles that surrounded them, the three prone figures undoubtedly looked like so many cadavers. Even to James they had suggested tragic opera. But to Lady Needbore, better acquainted with Castle Enniscrow's long tradition of murders, wraiths, banshees, specters, bogles, benignant and malignant hauntings, they suggested things that made the hair rise on her head and her skin develop qualities that would have been useful on the outside of a matchbox.

Perhaps in another second, reason might have prevailed and the cry that rose gurgling in the good lady's throat have been denied utterance. But at that precise moment a scrambling figure on all fours mounted the ultimate step of the stairs and crawled along the hall almost under the very skirts of Lady Needbore's dressing gown. Its face was averted, the hall was dim: there was no real chance for Lady Neebore to recognize who it was or even *what* it was. It might merely have been a murderer; but then on the other hand it could have been a ghoul fresh from feasting on the dead.

This, however, was a nice point which Lady Needbore did not stop to debate. Instead, the incipient scream inspired by the sight of the mortuary scene below stairs, was allowed to find vent and came into the world all the stronger for being delayed in gestation. It split the nocturnal peace in which Castle Enniscrow lay wrapped from top to bottom. It accelerated the crawling motion of the creature which had inspired it to what Lady Needbore afterward described as "a sort of horrid scramble."

This actually did less than justice to James, whose four-footed progress down the hall, stimulated by Lady Needbore's whoops, may have been an atavistic performance, but was one whose speed would have thrown no disgrace on his remotest forefathers. Before she had screamed twice he had rounded the corner of the corridor leading to his room, and before a single door had opened in response to her ululations he had gained his own and thrown himself inside. He even managed to crawl into bed and draw the clothes up to his chin. And then oblivion took him, and Lady Needbore's hysterics, the loud reassurances and interrogations of the ladies who sought to minister to her, the puffings and heavy footsteps of the men as they carried the still senseless forms of Bunny and Dodo and George in dis-

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grace to bed, troubled neither his conscience nor his dreams.

James' slumbers were profound, but they were not refreshing. If his evening had closed on a theme from "La Tosca," morning opened appropriately with a feeling that the anvil chorus from "Il Trovatore" was being played with great fire and vigor on his head. He could feel the blows and see the sparks. It must have been going on for some time, for otherwise why should his head feel red-hot and twice its usual size? James opened his eyes, closed them with a groan, opened them again—and saw untouched and cold by his bedside the "morning cup of tea" which the maid had as usual deposited there. He had been in the habit of pouring it out his window rather than drink it or hurt her feelings by scorning an old English custom. But this morning he gulped it eagerly and could have sworn that he heard it hiss as it went down. The cup rattled against his teeth. When he tried to sit up, the room played seesaw with him. Dully, he perceived that he was still in his dinner jacket. Dimly he wondered why.

AND THEN, above the dull roaring in his ears, a small but insistent voice began to make itself heard. "You promised," it said.

James fumbled at his disordered tie, his strangling collar. He would get into pajamas and fall again into merciful sleep, before his head burst or his jangled nerves stretched and broke. He would— But again from the depths of consciousness came the remainder: "You promised."

"Promised? What did I promise?" James asked. He asked it aloud and indignantly, as though his tormentor were somewhere in the room. For this young man had drunk enough alcohol the night before to incapacitate many a more experienced drinker for forty-eight hours. Had it not been for the categorical imperative now voicing itself in his brain, it is doubtful whether anything short of physical violence would have aroused him before evening. As it was his hold on reality was slight.

"You promised—her," vouchsafed the voice.

It was little information, but it was enough. Drunk or sober, there was only one "her" now to James. And drunk or sober, he would keep his promise to her. But what was it? The anvil chorus seemed to change its tune to "A-hunting We Will Go."

"O God," said James. "I promised to go hunting with her." He darted a glance at the clock by his bedside. Eleven! The meet would have taken place an hour before, and here he was without horse or habit. He could not ride at any time as they accounted riding, and now he could scarcely stand up. He was drunk, unshaven, disgraced. He had better pack and leave Enniscrow Castle before the hunt returned. He had—

"You promised," said the voice.

Setting the Fielden jaw in a grim line and steadying himself against the end of his bed, James disrobed, drew himself a cold bath and, while it was filling, rang. Dimly he was relieved to see that it was his friend George, the footman, who responded. George's feelings seemed to be equally compounded of surprise and admiration.

"George," said James, "could you get me some breakfast and some hunting kit, all in the space of ten minutes?"

"I could that, sir. Major Bingham—was you with him by any chance last night, sir?—won't be needing his today. Neither will two other gentlemen, but his would fit you best. I'll ask his man. And what would you want for breakfast, sir?"

"Take a look at me, George," said James, "and bring what you think I need."

"Very good, sir. I think I know what

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you mean. And what you gentlemen from America call a pick-me-up?"

"All right," said James, "but make sure it's also a stay-me-down."

"Ha, ha, sir. Very good, sir. You always have your joke." And George departed, chuckling.

"Joke," said James as he lowered himself into his cold bath. "Joke! The English would poke fun at a death's head. And that," he added when he surveyed himself in his shaving mirror, "is not far removed from the present instance."

THE COLD bath and George's pick-me-up gave James strength to shave and to scramble into the riding breeches that, he conjectured, must belong to none other than his late drinking companion, and final victim. But they could not give him an appetite for breakfast, and, without foundation of food, proved treacherous allies. By the time he had made his way to the stables, James found himself carefully placing one foot in front of another, like a man who picks his way through a fog.

He found the stables surprisingly empty. Finally a youth garbed like an undergroom appeared.

"Can you give me a horse?" James asked. "I was to have gone out with the hunt, but I overslept. I'll catch up with them."

"O Lor', sir, that I can't," said the boy. "There isn't a riding horse left in the stables. The few that was left over, sir, was borrowed from us by Sir Trevor Bigham for a party that came unexpected like to stay at The 'All, sir. The grooms has taken them over and there's only me here."

"But haven't you got any sort of a horse?" asked James.

"No, sir, nothing you could throw a leg over in the 'ole stables."

Dully, James turned away. His agonies had been all for nothing, then. He had promised Niniane and broken his promise, and he had no excuse to give that would stand the light of day. There had been something in her eyes as she had asked him to come—it had come and gone like summer lightning—that had sent thrilling through his nerves the hope of a future dizzying and sweet. And now, cursed fool, he had thrown away his chance.

It was at this moment that James heard, almost at his elbow, the high-pitched neighing of a horse.

The boy had disappeared. Why had he said there were no riding horses in the stables? James opened the door of the stall—and knew. There was a horse there, a lot of one. Equally, even James could see that this was no riding horse. Not even for a knight of old, clad in full armor, with his ladylove on a pillion behind.

What James beheld was a Shire stallion. Generations of breeders have produced nothing bigger or stronger. Not even the Percheron or the Clydesdale is so magnificent a specimen of equine power. And this was a champion specimen of the breed, the apple of Sir Bertram's eye, darling of the show ring, winner of a score of medals, and ribbons galore. His name, blazoned in brave letters above his manger, was Pride of Penzance.

Pride of Penzance was black from head to foot, glossy black. A shade over seventeen hands high, an English ton in weight, he bulked in the shadowed confines of his stall like an ocean liner in dock. His abundant covering of long, black hair had been carefully brushed, combed and parted down his short, straight back and allowed to feather out from his hocks so that it completely obscured his huge hoofs. No bantam, but feathered like one, he was a living picture of tremendous but docile strength. When James made a fumbling entrance into his stall he turned his broad head on his long, arched neck and nuzzled against the visitor's pocket for

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sugar. For deep in that enormous chest dwelt a heart as gentle and kind as that of any Newfoundlander that was ever left to guard a toddling baby.

THAT WAS the Pride of Penzance, the most distinguished occupant of Castle Enniscrow's stables. He was, James soon discovered, also the only one. The hunters were hunting, the workhorses in the fields working. He shouted for the groom, but even the groom had gone. There were left only himself—and the Pride of Penzance.

By no stretch of the imagination could that giant of his race be considered a riding horse. James knew that. But James no longer cared. He stood swaying on his feet, his early-morning wretchedness returned in full vigor, every nerve crying out for rest and sleep, but that small voice within him still enforcing its dictatorship over his rebellious stomach, his confused head. Suddenly James laughed a short laugh.

"I promised," he said. "All right, I'll keep my promise in a big way."

He lurched through the stables in search of saddle and bridle. When he found them, he had to notch fresh holes in the girth to permit it to circle the enormous bulk of the Pride of Penzance, and to stretch the bridle to its fullest extent to insert the bit between his huge jaws. Eventually he led his strange mount into the stable yard, saddled and bridled after a fashion no self-respecting hunter would have tolerated. But the Pride of Penzance took it all in good part. He had been ridden before. As many as three farm hands at a time had availed themselves of his broad back for a lift home from the fields, and their weight had incommoded him no more than that of his own hair.

James clambered into the saddle, no easy matter in his condition. "Take the graveled road to the left of the stables," George had said, "and keep on until you come to the pine wood. Take the first path you see to the left. That's Sandy Lane and will lead you to Spook Spin-

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ney, which is the most likely place they'll be looking for a fox."

James took the graveled road. The Pride of Penzance sniffed the morning air, tossed his arched neck and, to James' surprise, struck into a trot. James knew it must be a trot, for it was not a gallop. So large-scale, however, so planetary was the movement and so broad the back upon which he sat that he felt as though he were straddling a motor car whose driver was trying to reach Ireland via the Giant's Causeway. But the motion, he reflected, was probably just the thing for his liver.

He did not know whether to credit to this, or Merlin, the fact that his head began rapidly to clear. Hunting, after all, came within the range of those sports and games in the practice of which he had been guaranted success by his mighty, but strangely indiscriminating, patron. With returning perspicacity came a sense of the ridiculousness of the figure he would cut, mounted on this mastodon, in the eyes of Lady Niniane and of the hunt in general. But it was balanced by a cynical and reckless humor. He had already been thrust irrevocably beyond the pale by the series of bizarre and unseemly adventures into which his contract with Merlin had led him. It was given to him now to perceive the dramatic fitness of this, his last appearance, as the grotesque appropriate crown of all that had gone before.

VIII.

HE CAME to the pine wood and took the path to the left. Fifteen minutes brought him to Spook Spinney. He arrived at a crucial moment. The hunt had been late in meeting; Spook Spinney, a cover which almost never drew blank, had been late in producing a fox. By the time one was finally started, the younger members of the field had got out of hand and headed him back into the spinney, where he was lost. These developments had done everything but improve the temper of the new M. F. H.

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His face had grown as red as his coat and shocked matrons had moved their offspring out of earshot of his language.

But finally, from one of those white-and-tan shapes hunting ardently in the green gloom of the spinney, came a long-drawn yell. The other hounds found the hot scent and elaborated this opening bar into that heart-stirring overture that tells the huntsman the curtain is being rung up on his beloved sport. James, as he reached the spinney, had a brief glimpse of the pack pouring out its farther end, followed by the huntsman, the whips, Sir Bertram, and his following. Hounds, horses and men were setting a hot pace and discharging in it the suppressed energy and the accumulated exasperation of the morning's false starts.

It was a pace that could not last, that not even a blooded hunter could keep up for long. It was nothing that should be attempted, even for a moment, by a draft horse weighing a ton. But the shire, though James did not know it, is a direct descendant of the old English warhorse. Through the elastic veins of the Pride of Penzance coursed blood that had thrilled to the sound of the trumpets at Crecy and Agincourt. Speed had been bred out of him, but not his great heart. Here was thunder and shouting, and, like his scriptural ancestor, the Pride of Penzance pricked up his ears and neighed a loud "Ha, ha!" Then, spreading his huge hoofs in an awkward but stretching gallop, he began to clatter along the edge of the spinney after the pack.

Past the spinney, down a long slope of grassland and up another, he thundered. When he reached its crest, James saw the tail of the hunt disappear into another pine wood. It was an ancient wood, filled with cathedral silence, the trunks of its huge trees covered to a height of ten feet with a thin coating of moss. It was like the Bronze Wood through which the hero rides in Grimms' fairy tales, before he comes to the Silver Wood and the Gold Wood. Fresh air, alcohol and his surroundings combined to invest the ride for James with a strange, dreamlike quality. As the Pride of Penzance went pounding down the long aisles of the pine wood like a flying freight over a rough stretch of track, he began to feel as though he had ridden out of reality into the fourth dimension. This did not diminish when a chorus of yapping ahead indicated that the hounds had checked, and an occasional gleam of a red-skirted coat told him that he was overtaking the hunt.

BEFORE HE had quite overtaken it, the hounds found again and the field was off. Through the pine wood they pounded and over another stretch of pasture. This gave way to farm land, and their way was barred by a long stretch of thorny hedge. It was low only at one point and on the other side of this was a duck pond, deeper but as muddy as all its kind. Sir Bertram and his immediate following, knowing their country like a book, availed themselves of a gate at the extreme right. Niniane did the same, but turned back at left angles with the kindly intention of warning off the young, the imprudent or the ignorant from the duck pond. Just as James thundered up, young Pamela Needbore had charged the hedge at a half gallop, but, warned by Niniane's shout, had checked her mount at the last moment. James tried to follow her example, but he might as well have tried to bridle an avalanche. The Pride of Penzance took off from the ground as a wrecked freight takes off from a railroad track, sideswiped Pamela's horse with his huge hindquarters and soared diagonally over the hedge. The impact drove the lighter hunter into the hedge, but sent his luckless rider flying, still sitting an imaginary mount, half over, half through its spiny top. Pamela had

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elected that day to wear a pair of light summer jodhpurs. They were ill-adapted for riding a thornbush, and by the time she had landed sitting in the duck pond, her prophecy that she would need a dressing gown if James were to have any part in the hunt had been all too obviously fulfilled.

This, however, was not the end of that young man's misdoing. Contact with Pamela's hunter threw the Pride of Penzance somewhat off his course and defeated a mighty attempt to clear the duck pond. Instead he landed in the midst of its turbid waters with a violence that sent them flying heavenward in fountain effects that were as interesting as opaque. James had time for one glimpse at the startled face of Niniane before the falling waters descended upon it. The next moment the Pride of Penzance heaved himself up, climbed out of the pond and was off in full gallop, leaving behind him two indignant studies in chiaroscuro.

James, seeking to rein him in, might as well have tried to restrain an elephant with a dog leash. Across a plowed field they pounded, over another hedge into another farm. Here the chase led across the fields, past the corner of the farmer's cottage, to the laneway on which it abutted. The gate stood open; two thirds of the hunt had already passed through it. But as James thundered toward it there stood, full in his way, the farmer's three-year-old son. James wrenched mightily at the bridle of his charger. They missed the farmer's son, but not a clothes line on which, as on ground and hedge, the farmer's wife was drying household linen. Her scream at her endangered son had hardly died when it was followed by even shriller valedictory ululation over the disappearance of the more intimate part of her week's wash. Through the gate and down the lane it departed, kite-tailing bravely on its reft line from the mighty neck and shoulders of the Pride of Penzance. Endowed unaware with a comet's characteristic feature, that startled animal did his best to imitate a comet's speed. He overtook the main body of the hunt before it had left the lane. A head, slewing round over pink-coated shoulders to divine the cause of this mighty clatter of hoofs, disclosed the surprised face of Captain Thruster. Fate had another and greater surprise in store for him. As surely as a bolas thrown by the hand of an Argentine gaucho, a pair of stockings wrapped themselves around his neck, an article of lingerie not uncommonly in next association with them blinded his eyes, and muffled his protests, and he was dragged from his saddle with a violence which indicated that a crash helmet would indeed have been a useful precaution on that day.

FREED of his distasteful trappings as suddenly as he had acquired them, the Pride of Penzance galloped on, a clothes horse no more. His mighty lungs were heaving, his glossy hide was in a lather, but his pace still resisted all James' efforts to rein him in. And if he was nearing the end of his tether, so was the chase. When they debouched from the lane on rolling pasture land there were the fox, the hounds close on his track and, in irregular procession behind them, Sir Bertram, his huntsman, whipper-in and a half dozen keen riders all going as though their own lives, not the fox's, hung on every hoofbeat. In every line of their set faces and tense bodies, thought James, was expressed the conviction that to be in at the death of that small red animal before them was the supreme experience of civilization.

At the thought, the trancelike quality of the morning's experience seemed to deepen in James. His dream turned into a nightmare in which the red coats of the riders took on a horrid symbolism, the yapping, slavering hounds became embodiments of all cruelty which has

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ever spattered the story of man and the panting, toiling figure ahead, the helpless victim of some dark, Druidic blood sacrifice. Thrilling through his veins ran a fierce determination to balk these demon hunters of their prey. With a shout he spurred on the Pride of Penzance for the first time in that morning's ride. He felt the mighty loins flex and reflex beneath him as their tired but willing owner gave of his brave best, he heard the thunder of his hoofs increase. A few score strides and he was level with the foremost riders, a few more and he had passed them. As he passed, he saw Sir Bertram Enniscrow, M. F. H., for the first time become conscious of the unbidden presence in this, his hunt, of the stranger who as a household guest had already marred the orderly chronicle of domestic events with so many bizarre and uncomfortable happenings. He saw Sir Bertram's eyes widen as he recognized the Pride of Penzance, saw his face swell and redden, saw his mouth open. From all appearances would have emerged comment of a kind to wither the earth and blast heaven. But fate willed that it should never find vent, for just at that moment, a huge clod from one of the mighty hoofs of the Pride of Penzance took his owner full in the mouth and effectually sealed it. There are tribes of men who eat clay and like it, but Sir Bertram was obviously no geophagist. James had a moment's vision of him, standing in his stirrups, whip brandished heavenward, eyes protruding, mouth spouting clay and bad words, a vision apocalyptic and apoplectic. And then the Pride of Penzance was among the hounds, and had committed the unforgivable offense of kicking several, yelping, out of his way. But if the charger's offense was unforgivable, that of his rider was monstrous, and, in the three-hundred-year annals of English fox hunting, probably unique.

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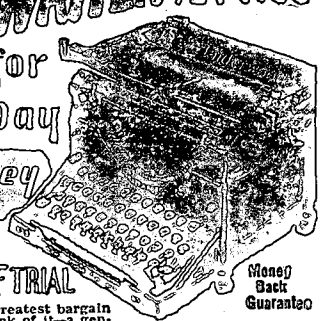

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off with it in his arms. Once there, the fox lay as limply as a slain warrior on his way to Valhalla across the saddle-bow of a Valkyrie. Whether motivated by intelligence or fatigue, it was obvious that he would make no difficulties for his rescuer. The difficulties, it was immediately apparent, would be made by his pursuers.

AT THE sight of this monstrous rape of their natural, their traditional and sanctified prey from under their very noses, men and hounds simultaneously gave tongue, and, amid a chorus of shouts, curses, howls and oaths, began with a common impulse to pursue the perpetrator of the sacrilege. The other had been but the chase, which is mimic war, but this was a crusade against the heathen, the blasphemer of holy things. As hotly as the fires of the Inquisition and as eager to consume a victim, burned the hearts of Sir Bertram and his followers as they raised the hue and cry.

As he listened to the yapping and yelling behind him, James began to feel, in a new, intensified and unpleasantly personal way, the agony of the fox and all things imminently pursued by the forces of destruction. Hounds, he knew, had been known to drag down a man, and he was not at all sure that Sir Bertram and his companions would be too anxious to prevent them. They were impeccably mounted, while the Pride of Penzance had already gone ten times too far and too fast for one of his breed. He could only hope that this, too, would be considered a sport and within the meaning of the act according to Merlin.

For five minutes they pounded on, with hounds and men still hot at their heels. Then ahead of him, on his left, James saw what had been a rutted track in the pasture-land dive between sparse woods and thick hedges and become a lane. Along the track and toward the lane two herdsmen were urging a herd of cattle, of the breed from which Cornwall derives the clotted cream for which

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it is famed. In another minute they would enter the lane, but James, with hope dawning in him, resolved to enter it first. He made it—by seconds—and then the cattle closed in behind him and the narrow way was filled with tossing heads and trotting, bulky forms. A few more seconds and what he had foreseen occurred. On the heels of the herd arrived a flying wedge of eager hounds, pressed under the hoofs of the frightened cows, tried to leap over their backs, nipped their flanks and drove them into a wild panic. In a moment the lane was jammed solid with milling, lowing, eye-rolling bovinity, the air filled with the shouts of the herdsmen and the curses of the whip and huntsman as they tried to extricate the hounds. As James pressed on, it swiftly died on his ear. The pursuit had been dammed in full flood. The danger was over.

And then, they trotted past a familiar gate. Inside was a farmyard. On the ground and on the hedge linen was drying: a broken fragment of line dangling from a pole told where but a short time before other linen had fluttered in the breeze. Another criminal had returned to the scene of his crime.

James reined in the Pride of Penzance. As he did so, the fox, which had lain so quietly across his saddle, leaped with one spring to the ground, with another in the middle of the farmyard. A flock of hens was clucking there. With an entire disregard of the Golden Rule, the fox gathered the neck of the plumpest of them in his jaws, bounded with it over the farther hedge and was gone.

THAT HE had been rescued from the necessity of providing dinner for others was no reason why the fox, being rescued, should neglect to provide his own. In this the fox was far more logical than James, who could not help regarding the incident as the final touch of bathos, the ridiculous anticlimax which typified the foolishness and fatuity of all that he had been and done at Castle Enniscrow. The trancelike mood in which he had begun his morning's adventure, the sharp excitement which had ended it, were alike gone. Left was only a writhing awareness of himself as a clown, a laughingstock, a preposterous prig whom not even a supernatural patron could keep from making a fool of himself. There was only one thing left for him now—flight. Flight back to his own world of past actions since he was obviously so singularly unfitted for the world of present ones. Before the hunt returned to Castle Enniscrow, he must be gone.

While James' reflections were taking this somber turn, the Pride of Penzance, with head hanging as low as his rider's, was picking his way home. Through the pine wood, past the spinney and down the graveled road they went. Now they stood at the door of the still silent stables. Into his stall James led the Pride of Penzance, draped a stable blanket over his lathered bulk, and patted his mighty neck with a prayer that no harm should come from his morning's exertions. There was no sign of Sir Bertram nor his friends. With another prayer of thankfulness, James hurried into the hall. There, standing in front of the fireplace, he found Niniane.

She had changed her muddied habit for a housedress of cool green. It matched her sea-green eyes and caressed the fluent contours of her undinelike figure. The look she bent on James was enigmatic. Not even her far ancestress, Niniane the water sprite, could have looked more desirable, James thought, nor more fateful.

"Well?" she said.

Into James' cheeks, pale with fatigue, the cool interrogation brought a flush. As he looked at her and was shaken by the sense of her exquisite desirableness, his face took on an expression bitter and desperate.

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"Well?" he repeated harshly. "How musically you say that, Niniane, but how much significance you give it. 'Well, what sort of fool have you made of yourself this time and what sort of explanation have you for it?' is what it means. Well, I haven't killed anybody as far as I know, but they will be bringing your friend, Captain Thruster, in soon on his way to the hospital. I don't think I have quite killed your father's best show horse, but that remains to be seen. I think I ruined a number of the hounds; and I certainly carried the fox away from under your father's nose. You don't lynch people here, I understand, but you have lunatic asylums. It would be better for me to leave before your father gets back. And that's all I did this time."

"It seems quite enough," said Niniane. "But—why?"

"IF YOU mean 'how,' I can tell you. I can tell you, but you won't believe it. You'll believe I was right about the lunatic asylum. Your ancestor, Merlin, whom we were talking about the other night. Well, he really was your ancestor. He really was double-crossed by your ancestress with one of his own spells. And I released him from it by accident: that's how the tomb in your library got broken. These spells may be a kind of hypnotism—Yoga—that sort of thing. I don't know. Anyway, in return for what I had done, he gave me two of them. One was to insure me success in the things you seem to set such store on here. You know, games and all that sort of thing."

"This is a fairy tale, of course, James. But why are you telling it to me?" It was the first time she had used his Christian name, but James was too intent to remark it.

"Because it's the truth. Oh, I know it's incredible, but you see, you will soon have proof of it. I said Merlin gave me two charms."

"And the other?"

"Is to make you love me."

The words came defiantly from between his clenched teeth. The Lady Niniane looked indignant. She noted the lines of resolution that furrowed his tired face and read pain and longing there. For an instant a complex of expressions seemed to flaw the transparency of her sea-green eyes, realization, relief—could it even be a sort of tender amusement?—and then they became as enigmatic as before.

"Everything's fair in love or war," said James stubbornly.

"Not fair, effective. In war perhaps. Your enemy is just as dead if you stab him in the back. But love? Assuming your incredible story is true and you have this power—of what use would my love be to you if you knew that you had never earned it? It would be like taking a sleepwalker to wife."

"At least no one else would have you. I couldn't bear that. Oh, I know what you are going to say. I know what I am. Nature's fool turned ravisher. Another Faust who's sold his soul to the devil. Well, the price is not too high. If I lose you, I lose it anyway. You have drawn my soul from me. You have water witch's blood in you. I know it for I would willingly sink down in the green depths with you. And for you, it seems. God, it makes me laugh to remember that a few short weeks ago I thought a man's work was all that mattered. History! When I look into your eyes I can read more history than Alexander ever dreamed of. The story of the race. The meaning of life. My fate. It's all there."

"It's all there, is it? I never dreamed my eyes were so expressive. And the charm, where do you keep it?"

"Here in my watchcase. And I am going to use it."

"You are going to use it. You are going to take me whether I will or not. Well, in that case"—swiftly she dropped

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her negligent pose and came to James' side—"well, in that case, since I must yield, it would be better to yield gracefully. Dear James"—and she took his hot cheeks between her cool hands—"dear, sweet, silly James, did you never hear that the quickest way to win a woman is to ask her?"

"You mean— Niniane, you can't mean?"

SHE MIMICKED him. "Yes, I mean and I can mean. Why were you so sure that I couldn't? There's a limit to what a woman can do in the way of encouragement. Even if she has witch's blood in her."

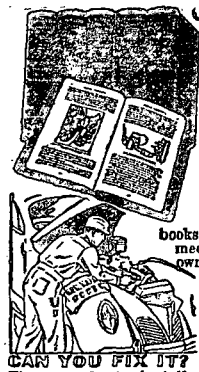
"But I can't do any of the things you do," said James miserably. "And all your friends do them so well. I felt I must seem like a sort of prig beside them, something pallid and pedantic. Not your kind."

"If you mean games and sports," she said, "I am not exactly tired of them, but I am tired of people who can't do or think or talk about anything else. I am bored by hunting sets and county society. I may not have a brain, but I know one when I meet it. What does a woman want in a man? Something different—from herself and everybody else. And you must admit, James, that you are that. I loved you that evening when we sat together and you talked to me. You made me think: you made it exciting to think. No one else had ever done that. And besides, James, you are such a dear, silly thing and so much in need of—mothering—"

Niniane stirred in his arms, disengaged herself, patted her hair into place. "I have been a forward girl," she said. "I think you must have used your baleful arts on me after all. Not, thank heavens, as you used them on Lady Needbore. It was you, of course?"

"I am afraid so," said James. "It was an accident."

"I recognized your handiwork. *L'homme fatal.* After all, I've been a victim myself even though you only



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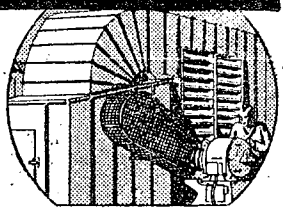

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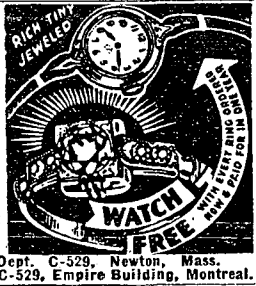

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blackened my face a few times."

"That was an accident, too."

"I shudder to think what might have happened by design. You might have blackened my character. With that charm, I mean. By the way, may I see it?"

She turned the fragment of parchment to the firelight. "I can't read what it says. I don't see my name in it."

"It wouldn't be.. Merlin didn't make it specific."

"Didn't make it specific? Do you mean it would work just as well on any other woman?"

"I suppose so," said James. "But there isn't any other."

"Then you don't need the charm. And I know a safe place for it. So there won't ever be any other woman." She rolled it into a ball. "In there," and she tossed it into the fire.

For a moment the crumpled parchment resisted the flames. And then it ignited. There was an ear-splitting crash, a blinding flash as of many lightnings. A huge flame roared for a moment up the chimney, leaving on the hearth nothing but the blackened logs. And then, borne on the wings of a terrific back draft, every particle of soot and ashes was blown into the room. James escaped most of it. Niniane escaped it not at all. She had stood in front of the fireplace, the blonde and typical product of years of gentle English living. A moment later she was transformed into something obviously made in Birmingham—Alabama—and mourning the metamorphosis.

From her suddenly brunette countenance two sea-green eyes looked oddly and accusingly at James, as two blackened hands tried vainly to shake the soot from a dress that had once also been green.

"I don't think I'll bother washing my face again," she said. "We'll just go away like this and get married."

"It was—if was an accident," said James anxiously.

THE END.

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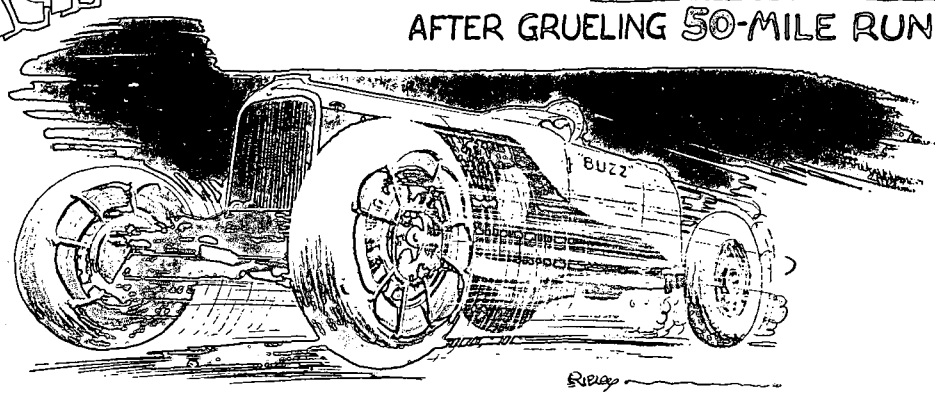

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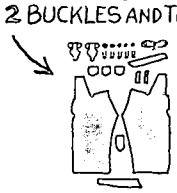

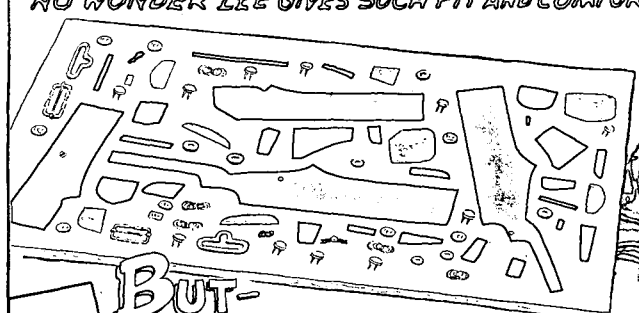

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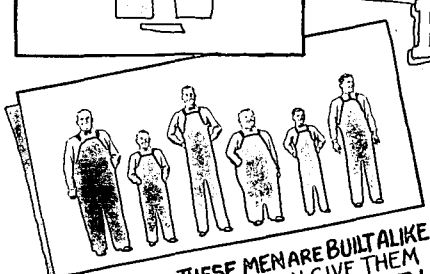

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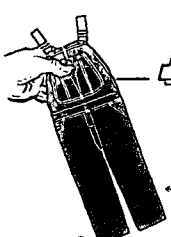

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